



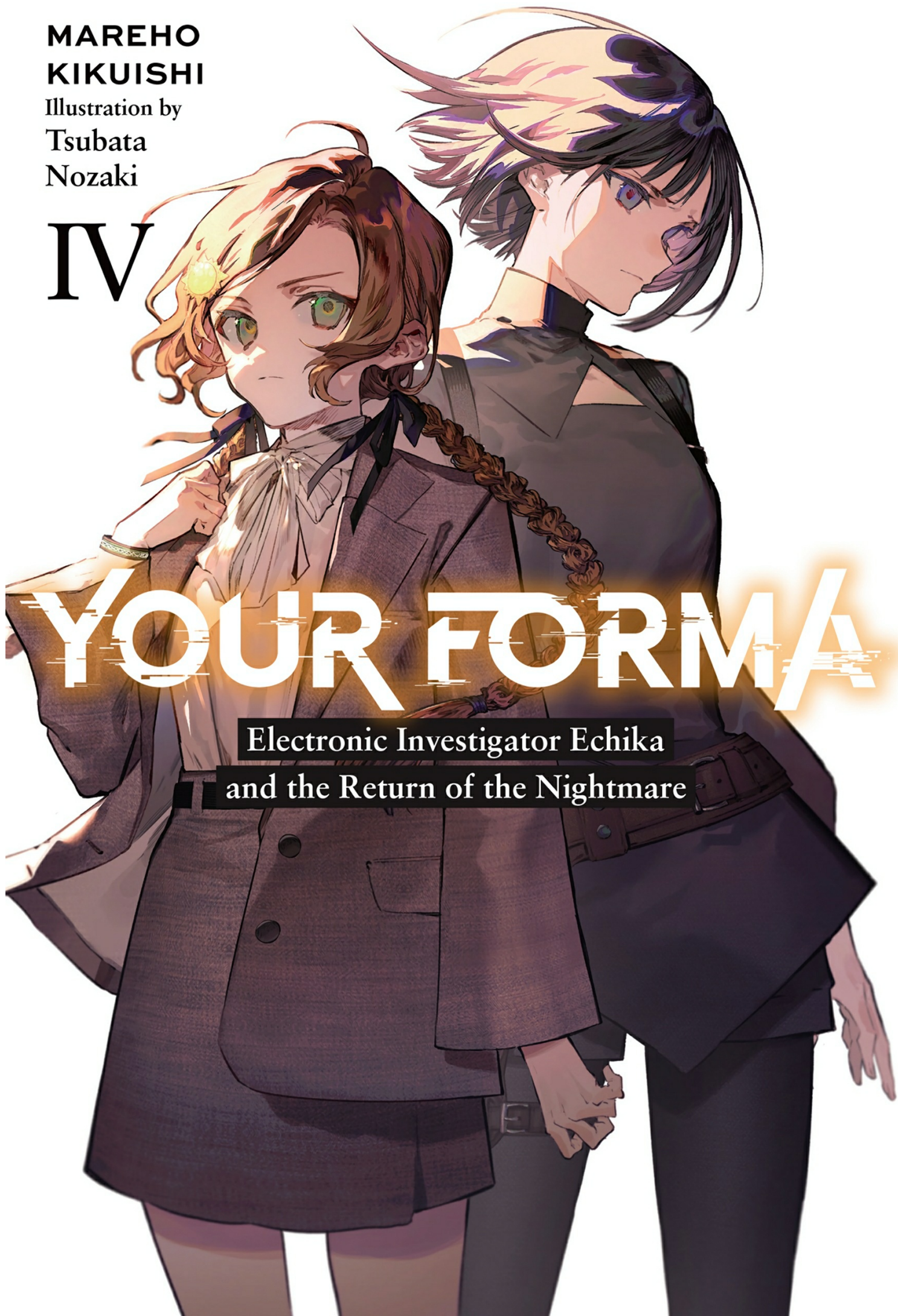
MAREHO
KIKUISHI

Illustration by
Tsubata
Nozaki

IV

YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika
and the Return of the Nightmare



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IV



Darya R. Tchernova

Sozon's wife. Accepted Harold when her husband brought him home and treats him as family. Following Sozon's death, she bequeathed his belongings to Harold, with whom she still lives.

Sozon A. Chernov

A detective in the Saint Petersburg City Police's burglary-homicide department. Took on Harold as his partner after discovering him abandoned in an alley and came to accept him as family. Taught Harold his rare deductive skills.

If nothing else, he wanted things to end peacefully, just like this. That was all he wished for in that freezing alleyway.

Sozon and Darya told people that Harold was their younger brother. And to Harold, they were the only real family he'd ever had.

That was to say, they were everything to him.



Bigga

A Sami girl who originally lived in a luddite region in Norway. Gave up the family bio-hacking trade and now seeks a new path as a consultant for the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.

Y O U R F O R M A

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Return of the Nightmare

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YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Return of the Nightmare

YEN
ON
New York

Copyright

YOUR FORMA IV

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Return of the Nightmare MAREHO KIKUISHI

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Tsubata Nozaki

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Cover art by Tsubata Nozaki

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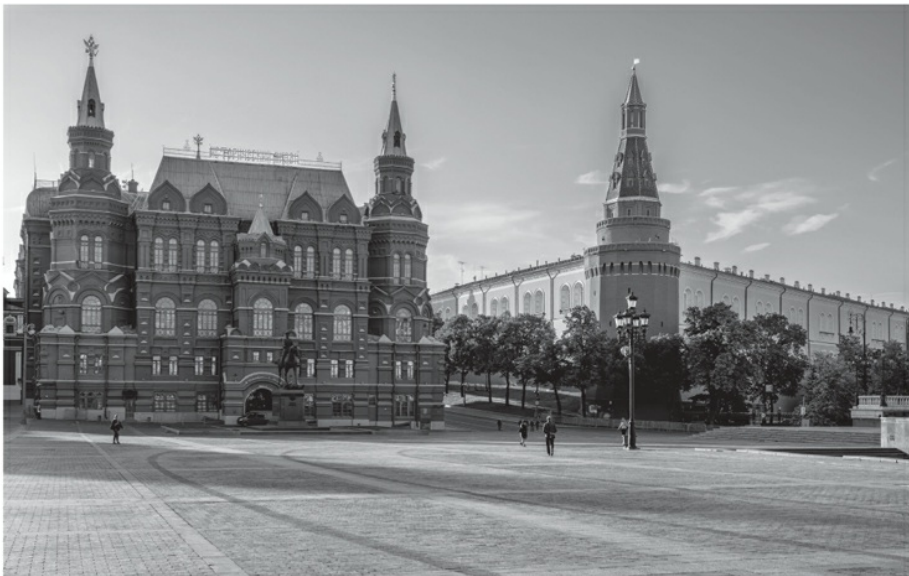
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The return of the Nightmare of Petersburg?! Vagrant Amicus discovered murdered!

26 October 01:12 PM

On the 25th of October, the dismembered “corpse” of an Amicus was discovered in Moscow Victory Park. The news has shaken Amicus sympathizers. To make matters worse, the crime’s resemblance to the Nightmare of Petersburg killings has struck terror in the hearts of city residents.



[Pictured] Moscow Victory Park, where the destroyed Amicus was discovered.

The Saint Petersburg City Police have not disclosed any details about the incident, suggesting the investigation is going poorly. The Nightmare of Petersburg was a serial murder incident that took place in 2022. The investigation into the killings has been effectively called off, and the case remains unresolved. It is highly likely this event could lead to a reopening of the investigation.



Amicus

Return of the Nightmare



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YOUR FORMA

Prologue

Atonement

Prologue

Atonement

His need to atone for him, the remorse he felt for what had happened—those emotions could not be encapsulated with a word as trite as “revenge.”

The basement was terribly dark. Only faint rays of light shone through the gaps in its ceiling, their glow scattering over the aging farming equipment. Assuming his system was accurate, Harold could tell from the scent of moldy earth and the fragrance of blood hanging over him that it was roughly evening. But he couldn't very well believe it.

In this place alone, night seemed to reign eternal.

Yet he kept on struggling all the same. Each time he stirred, his body, which was tied to a pillar, creaked audibly. The ropes constricting his throat and holding him in place seemed somehow tighter than they had been before. He squirmed, trying to reach the wearable terminal on his wrist, but his hands wouldn't budge in their restraints behind his back.

But even if we never rise to the surface again, even if both he and I are fated to sink...

Harold looked ahead to Sozon, who was tied to a chair and gasping for breath through the bridle's bit stuffed into his mouth. His disheveled black hair clung to his sweat-drenched forehead. His eyes, which could see through all falsehood, looked to be on the verge of spilling out of their sockets. How long had it been since his right arm was brutally crushed and severed?

The nails of his hand were dug into the floor, as though the severed limb were desperately craving something.

There was no fixing a broken human body. Sozon was dying. He wasn't going to make it at this rate.

“Let’s go with his left leg next.”

The low pitch of those words, modified by a cheap voice changer, seemed to surge up from the belly of the earth. The man who spoke was a tall, dark shadow. He looked like a black, burning shade. A mask perfectly hid his features, and his raincoat seemed to naturally blend in with the gloom. The electric saw in his hand was dripping with blood.

The man easily knocked the chair down, slamming Sozon’s body against the floor. The impact of the blow loosened the bit from his mouth.

“My...partner...will catch you... I swear.” He breathed out the words.

“Even if he does, an Amicus can’t so much as slap handcuffs onto anyone. Just look at him now.”

Harold gritted his teeth. How could he let this happen? He’d been careless. He came here to rescue Sozon, yet this shadow had been able to tie him down with ease.

For the Laws of Respect had rendered Harold powerless to resist.

Respect humans, obey their orders, and do them no harm.

But throughout this whole ordeal, his systems had been straining under a massive contradiction.

According to the Laws of Respect, Harold was absolutely forbidden from resisting the shadow by attacking him. No matter how horrible the man’s deeds, Harold could not harm a human being. He had little option but to remain tied to the pillar. Yet if he did nothing, Sozon would be murdered before his very eyes. This meant he was indirectly contributing to him being hurt.

Harold didn’t know how to resolve this contradiction, but there had to be an answer. And if he didn’t arrive at one soon, it would be too late. But his thoughts were scattered, and he had nothing to hold them in check; error warning upon error warning blared in his head as he beheld the incomprehensible scene.

He needed to save Sozon. That much was clear. But these ropes were in the way. He couldn’t escape. And even if he could, he wouldn’t be able to lay a

finger on this shadow. The contradiction in his programming would hold him back.

“Well, Amicus? Think you can catch me?” The shadow turned to face him, though Harold couldn’t see his eyes. “You’re nothing but a machine obeying programming. I could hack your owner to bits, and you wouldn’t feel a thing.”

You’re empty. Hollow. That’s why you’re so utterly powerless right now.

“Take a good long look at what I’m about to show you. Burn this sight into your empty brain.”

The electric saw whirred to life in the man’s grasp. Its shrill mechanical screech stabbed into Harold’s hearing device.

Stop it. No. Don’t hurt him any more.

The shadow swung the blade down at Sozon’s left leg, which was still attached to his body.

In the dark gloom of the basement, the splash of human blood looked as black as circulatory fluid.



<Today’s maximum temperature is 20°C. Attire index D, wear a coat throughout the day>

Saint Petersburg’s western Peterhof district was a quiet area, detached from the noise and tumult of the city center. The vicinity of Peterhof Palace was a tourist destination, so it bustled with activity, but once you set foot in the residential area, you would find only a morose late-summer sky.

Harold cruised through the unpaved roads of the residential district in his Lada Niva.

“Oh...it’s no use. I’m still nervous,” Darya lamented in the passenger seat, sighing for what felt like the thousandth time that day.

Her chestnut hair seemed tidier than usual, and she was wearing a one-piece dress that she very rarely put on.

“Harold, do you remember the last time we went to Sozon’s family home?”

“Last Christmas, if memory serves.” Harold glanced at her, his hands still on the steering wheel. She was anxiously rubbing her palms together. “Maybe we should have asked for them to be delivered instead?”

Two days ago, they had gotten a call from Sozon’s younger brother, who lived in Peterhof. He told them he’d discovered some of his brother’s belongings while cleaning out their mother’s home. Hearing this, Darya instantly promised to come pick up the articles.

“Yes, it might have been better if we did.” Darya seemed to regret it even now and hung her head. “But you know, it would be disrespectful to not come see him in person.”

“I admire your sense of duty, Darya, but you could let me take care of it if it’s weighing on you.”

“No, if anything, that would be more unreasonable.” Darya raised her head sluggishly. “I’m more worried about you, Harold. You should have stayed home.”

She’d told him this dozens of times since yesterday. From Harold’s perspective, sending Darya alone to a place overflowing with memories of Sozon was much more concerning. But she didn’t seem to be on the same page.

“Well, I can’t spend my day off cooped up at home.”

“You could have gone somewhere else. Didn’t you have a promise to meet Miss Hieda?”

“No, today she has plans with Bigga...a friend.”

As he answered, Harold thought it was odd. Darya must have thought Echika and he were close friends. And while they were, it did make him feel strange.

“Anyway, don’t worry about me, Darya. And let me know if it gets to be too much for you.”

Before long, they pulled over in front of a civilian home. It had a green triangular roof and resembled a small hut. The spacious front lawn was crowded with kindling and unused tools that had been covered with tarps,

along with neglected drum barrels.

The place wasn't well-maintained, by any standard. Unfamiliar deciduous trees framed the dwelling, looking down at them with expressions that seemed to say they could wither at any second.

It looks even more run-down than the last time we were here, Harold thought.

He got out of the Niva and went through the decaying wooden gate with Darya. Their shoes sank into the mud of the lawn. They stepped onto the porch and pressed on the rusted doorbell. Harold quietly patted Darya on the back, noticing that her shoulders had stiffened.

A moment later, the door opened.

"Hey, Darya, Harold. Thanks for coming."

Opening the door was a black-haired young man who gave a very stylish impression—Sozon's younger brother, Nicolai. Unlike his brother, he had friendly, round eyes, and his canine-like teeth showed whenever he smiled.

"Hello, Nicolai," Darya said, visibly relaxing. "Are you here alone today?"

"No, Mom's here, too. People from the Bereaved Families Association came over, so she's talking to them right now."

"The Bereaved Families Association? Is there someone I know?" Darya asked.

"It's Mr. Abayev, the representative."

The two hugged in greeting, and Harold shook Nicolai's hand. Since his parents believed Amicus were only machines, Nicolai had grown up without ever knowing what they were like, but he nevertheless treated Harold favorably, since he saw him as part of Sozon's "family."

"Is it just me, Harold, or have you gotten taller?"

"Yes," Harold said. This was a joke, of course. "I might have grown a centimeter or two."

Nicolai beckoned them inside, and Harold's gaze settled on a mirror set near the entrance. It was more clouded over and dirty than the last time he saw it, suggesting it hadn't been cleaned at all. The dim chatter of Nicolai's mother and

the guests drifted over from the living room.

“We have Sozon’s things on the second floor. Come on up,” Nicolai said.

He led Harold and Darya to a room on the second floor—Sozon’s. He had lived there until he found employment, but now it had been converted into a storeroom. An unused shelf blocked the window, and some of the wallpaper was peeling off. It had been quite a while since Harold had entered this room. The last time, Sozon had brought him here personally.

“Mom started cleaning out the house the other day,” Nicolai said, moving the garbage bags and boxes littering the floor and opening the closet. “She gathered all of Sozon’s things in one place. Feel free to take anything if it strikes your fancy.”

He took out a transparent storage box and placed it on the floor. He opened the lid, revealing an HSB memory stick, an old album, and some children’s books. Darya peered into the box like it was drawing her in.

“I read this book when I was little,” she said. “I never knew Sozon had it, too.”

“We only ever read paper books,” Nicolai said. “Mom’s still like that. I don’t know why’s she’s so fixated on analog stuff.”

“Why did she decide to clean out the place all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know. It’s honestly a little scary. I always come with her to the hospital, but they didn’t find any major problems with her last time.”

“Hmm... How is she?”

“Her temper is all over the place, same as always. We tried using Your Forma medical HSB cartridges to help her out, but they didn’t agree with her. She’s taking tablets now that work all right, but her memory’s still faulty...”

As he listened to their exchange, Harold casually glanced at Darya. She was keeping up a brave front, but this house contained many memories of Sozon. He was prepared to take her out of here the moment she showed any sign of it being too much to bear...

That being said, Harold was overcome with nostalgia himself. He looked away, realizing he needed to readjust his emotional engine. His gaze fell on an

envelope that had been stuffed inside a transparent garbage bag. The name of a company was emblazoned on its surface in Cyrillic letters.

Delevo Grief Care Company

He recalled Darya being recommended a similar service shortly after Sozon's passing. Grief companies were businesses that offered various services to help people process the death of a loved one. They provided counseling, both via AI and via human therapists, created digital clones based on the deceased person's personality, helped with estate liquidations, and ensured the safe handling of precious keepsakes.

"Oh, that?" Nicolai noticed Harold's gaze. "The family doctor recommended it a few times already. I figured it might help Mom, so I got the paperwork for it."

"And then threw it away?" Harold asked.

"Just doing that made her hysterical. I thought it might help her, but...I guess it's not in the cards."

Nicolai stared at the envelope. His mother wasn't the only one who needed help, after all.

"I'm sure your feelings are getting through to her," Harold said, picking his words carefully. "It must still be hard on your mother to have people worry over her."

"Yes," Darya agreed. "After all, it's only been two and a half years since it happened."

"Two and a half years already, huh...?" Nicolai took a deep breath. "It feels like just yesterday..."

The air became oppressively keen, as though it could slice into their cheeks at any moment. But maybe Harold's optical device had simply been slow to pick this up. He thought it best to change the subject.

"Isn't this mine?" Harold asked quietly, reaching into the box and picking out a gaudy-colored tie. "So this is where it was. I thought I'd lost it."

Nicolai and Darya let out their held breaths.

"Oh, I remember...", Nicolai said, his expression softening. "I gave that to you

when Sozon first brought you over. You ended up leaving it here, so I figured you didn't want a hand-me-down."

"Not at all," Harold replied. "I remember that you used it for your high school graduation, right?"

"Yeah, and everyone laughed at me because it was so tacky. Let me tell you, I'm not the one who picked it out. Blame my uncle's bad taste."

"Really?"

"Cut it out," Nicolai said, tapping Harold on the shoulder. "I just thought it would suit you better."

"Yes, I think I'll put it on when I go home today."

"Don't," Darya said, a smile coming to her face. *Thank goodness.* "It's too flashy for you, too."

Much to Harold's relief, the tension did not return following this exchange. Darya picked out mementos of Sozon at her own discretion, eventually deciding to take a book and pen of his. Harold settled on the tie. If nothing else, he'd at least put it up as decoration.

They left the room and heard voices coming from the first floor. Descending the stairs, they saw that Abayev from the Bereaved Families Association was on his way out. He was a slim, middle-aged man with darkish skin, and the coat he had on was too broad for his shoulders.

But more striking still was Sozon's mother, who looked positively emaciated as she saw the man off.

"Elena," Abayev said encouragingly. "Just keep on taking your medicine for now. Don't overthink things, all right?"

"You don't have to repeat yourself. I'll be fine."

Abayev left, and Sozon's mother closed the front door listlessly. Harold thought to escort Darya back up to the second floor, but of course, Elena turned around before he could manage that.

"...So you came."

Elena's sour expression looked far too old for a woman who was sixty-three years of age. Her cheeks, carved with gentle wrinkles, had stiffened visibly. Her hair was tied into a bun, out of which some stray hairs fell over her temples.

This was Elena Alexavna Tchernova—Sozon's mother.

"And to think," she said, her gaze turning to a glare when she lay eyes on Harold. "You have the nerve to bring this *thing* here. You haven't disposed of it yet?"

This was the response Harold expected from her. It didn't come as a surprise.

"They're here because I asked them to come over," Nicolai said, approaching his mother. "Stop it, Mom."

"I don't mind having Darya in the house, but I don't want this *thing* loitering around."

"My apologies," Harold said, trying to sound as inoffensive as possible. "We'll be leaving right away, so—"

"Don't speak to me, you good-for-nothing!" Elena snapped at him abruptly, and three droplets of spit came flying at him. "You just stood by and let him die!"

Elena had seen Amicus as mere machines to begin with, but with Sozon's death, her outbursts toward Harold intensified. As far as she was concerned, Harold was defective, a robot who hadn't been able to save her son despite being on the scene of the crime.

Of course, she was well aware that the Laws of Respect forbade Amicus from opposing human beings. But that didn't change how she saw Harold. He'd never once gotten angry at her for it, of course. In human society, the bond between parent and child was of the utmost importance, so Elena's attitude was reasonable. Indeed, he truly had been "good for nothing" that day.

"We're sorry," Darya said, visibly flustered. "Hmm—"

"You should take care, too, Darya. How long are you going to have this piece of junk wear Sozon's clothes?" Elena continued reproachfully, glaring at Harold. "If you're going to have this machine serve as his substitute, you have no right

to set foot in my household!”

“Mom, please,” Nicolai said, pushing his mother’s back, seemingly upset. “Go back to the living room and take your medicine. Hurry up.”

“Have them leave. I want them out!”

Nicolai pushed his mother, still spitting vitriol, to the living room and shut the door behind her. But they could still hear Elena shouting and cursing from behind it.

Harold slowly forced down the strain bubbling up in his system. The mere fact that he felt this strain felt shameful to him.

“I’m sorry. This just had to happen at the last minute...,” Nicolai said, ruffling his hair apologetically. “Anyway, don’t let what she said bother you. She doesn’t mean it. It’s all because she’s sick.”

“Yes, don’t worry. We’re fine,” Darya said, managing to feign calmness.

In the end, she and Harold left the house like they were running away from something.

The lukewarm breeze washed away the tension in Harold’s body as soon as they stepped outside. Darya walked beside him, pale in the face. She stopped in her tracks the moment they passed through the gate. Her pretty walnut hair wavered with vulnerable softness.

“Are you all right, Darya?” Harold asked, and immediately regretted doing so.

He knew he shouldn’t have brought her here. Instead of responding, Darya brushed away a lock of hair from her cheek, looking up at him as she did. Her eyes were trembling, lost. Full of guilt.

Harold had a good idea about what was on her mind. She was blaming herself for not being able to dissuade him from coming here.

“Harold, I...I really do see you as a younger brother,” she said.

“Thank you. I think of you as family, too.”

These were his true feelings, but Darya shook her head sadly. Her lips parted,

then closed, then opened again.

“...Please. Don’t take the things she said seriously.”

His heart ached.

“I’m sorry. I should have known better than to wear Sozon’s clothes today,” Harold said.

“I didn’t tell you not to wear them. But that’s not the problem here,” Darya appended, almost fearfully. “Harold, you’re...you’re not a substitute for Sozon. I don’t want you to think that. You’re you, not him.”

“I know that, of course.”

“So that’s why you’re allowed to wear whatever you like. And the Niva is old, I won’t mind if you buy a new car. You don’t have to use Sozon’s room, either. You can go back to your bedroom—”

“Darya.”

Harold gently touched her shoulders, sensing she could burst into tears at any second. He gazed into her face, finding that her breathing was shallow. She had to be aware of the fact she was unsettled.

The clothes, the car, the room. Darya had given them all to Harold after Sozon’s death. As an Amicus, he couldn’t tell if she’d done that out of love for her deceased husband or out of a desire to heal by focusing all her affection on her remaining family. Honestly, it didn’t matter either way.

Harold had gladly worn Sozon’s clothes. He’d chosen to drive the Niva. He’d elected to sleep in Sozon’s now unoccupied room. Every avenue that was available to him, he took. Because he would do anything to fill the gaping hole in his household.

Perhaps this could be his way of atoning to Darya for failing to save Sozon.

He knew. Knew that no sin was light enough to be repaid by this little. He was only doing this for peace of mind. But that was fine. Because the moment it stopped providing that peace of mind, he would no longer be able to breathe.

Even though he hadn’t drawn a single breath since the moment of his birth.

“I’m only doing this because I want to. My hobbies and tastes just happen to align with Sozon’s. And I’ve gotten especially attached to the Niva, so I’m not going to replace it for the foreseeable future.”

“Stop...”

“I’m being honest. You can complain all you want about how uncomfortable it is, but I’m going to keep using it.”

Darya hung her head. Harold felt her shoulders tremble, and she let out a sob. Left with no choice, he embraced the last remaining member of his family. He rubbed her slender back comfortingly. Her breath, hot with tears, spilled against his chest.

He found himself looking down at Sozon’s jacket. Its frayed edges caught his eye; it would soon be worn down entirely.

But he couldn’t give in. Not yet.

I haven’t atoned for his death.

He had to find the “shadow” and exact justice upon him.

That was his sole—

“Let’s go home, Harold.”

Slowly and silently, a memory he’d kept repressed forced its way into his consciousness. The hair on Darya’s head slowly eroded and disappeared before his eyes. A moment later, he was once again sucked into his recording of that day—the one he’d seen thousands of times already.

He remembered Sozon’s moans.

The sound of his arm falling off.

The thud of his dismembered leg hitting the ground.

The way his blood splattered when his head was severed.

The figure of the shadow, as vivid as the day he’d seen it.

Amicus had perfect memories. Harold could look back on his experiences

whenever he wished.

Which was why that basement was everything to Harold—even now.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 1

Footsteps of the Nightmare



Chapter 1

Footsteps of the Nightmare

1

It was the tail end of October. Saint Petersburg was already on the cusp of a long winter.

“It’s been three months since we tracked down Alan Jack Lascelles.”

A heavy air hung over the meeting room of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau’s Saint Petersburg branch as they conducted an international conference call. The flexible screen on the wall projected the image of Chief Totoki from her office at the headquarters, as well as familiar faces from the special investigations bureaus of different branches. All of them wore solemn expressions.

And of course, this included Echika, who was also in attendance.

“We really need to make some kind of progress already,” Totoki said, sighing. **“Anyway, please deliver your report to close things out, Saint Petersburg branch. How goes TOSTI’s retrieval?”**

“We’ve since identified two new individual users and recovered the program from both of them,” Investigator Fokine replied. His wavy dark-brown hair was well-kempt, but his expression betrayed signs of exhaustion. “We’ve been looking into corporations who use analysis AIs, too. Matchmaking app operating companies, grief care companies, accessory manufacturing affiliates, medical institutions... We’re going over them all with a fine-tooth comb, but nothing’s come up so far.”

TOSTI—the analysis-type AI that was the brains behind E, the conspiracy theorist who had shaken Europe via the anonymous message board TEN that summer. The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau had concluded that its

exceptional performance violated International AI Operations Law.

Despite this, TOSTI had been temporarily released as open-source software, allowing anyone to install it. This meant that there could be any number of users who had access to it apart from Investigator Robin and her brother, who had been behind the previous incident.

Three months had passed since that case was closed. Branches of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau in each country were pursuing and recovering scattered versions of TOSTI.

“Very well. I want to stay on pace with the other bureaus, so make sure to finish up by the end of the year,” Totoki said flatly. **“Anyway, that’s the general outline of the situation. I’m sure you know, but I want you to put everything you’ve got into both TOSTI’s retrieval and the hunt for Lascelles.”**

TOSTI’s assumed developer, Alan Jack Lascelles. As it turned out, the name belonged to a fictional “ghost.” Lascelles’s personal data was registered in the Your Forma user database, and he was even listed as the owner of a house in Friston, England, but the man himself didn’t actually exist.

For now, they had to assume that “Lascelles” was just an alias made up by the real culprit. But it wasn’t yet clear what motivated them to go that far.

“We’ll check in next week. I expect good news.”

With that, the conference adjourned. The screen went black, and Investigator Fokine sagged in his seat. As the other investigators got to their feet, he slumped across the meeting room table. They’d been investigating for months and had scarcely turned up anything. It felt like they were being asked to look for a gem the size of a grain of sand in the Gulf of Finland. It only made sense he’d feel discouraged.

Just as Echika tried to call out to him...

“He’s under a lot of pressure,” Harold said from beside her. “Why did Chief Totoki make him the head of the Special Investigations Unit?”

The Amicus’s fair, sculpture-like features contorted in concern. He was wearing a turtleneck sweater, since temperatures had dropped markedly this week. It occurred to Echika—albeit belatedly—that she’d never seen Harold

wear the kind of mass-produced clothes made for Amicus.

“Well, Investigator Fokine was part of the Investigation Support Department, and they’ve been tracking E’s activities for years. Given how long he’s been with them, she probably thought the time was right to entrust him with a major case.”

“But just look at him now—it seems like he only managed to get down three pancakes this morning.”

“If he’s got that much of an appetite, I’m sure he’s fine,” Echika said, exasperated.

“I can hear you, you know,” Fokine grumbled, raising his head groggily. “And it wasn’t three pancakes, it was two. Aren’t you supposed to be omniscient or something, Harold?”

“It was a joke. I might be highly efficient, but I’m not perfect.”

Following a meeting with the International AI Ethics Committee (IAEC), the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau had decided to organize a Special Investigations Unit in each branch. As Harold had alluded to, Fokine was elected to be the head of the Saint Petersburg branch unit. The unit was composed of twenty members, and Echika and Harold were cooperating with them as electronic investigators.

In truth, Echika hadn’t expected to ever work with Fokine again after being reinstated to her original position—yet, to her surprise, that was exactly what had happened.

“Don’t call yourself highly efficient,” Echika said, glaring at Harold reproachfully, to which he responded by wordlessly staring up at the ceiling. “More importantly, have you tried reanalyzing TOSTI’s source code yet, Investigator Fokine?”

“Yeah... The section chief says it’s the third time already. But no matter how much they look, the code doesn’t line up with the AI’s performance.”

After the incident, they’d handed over TOSTI’s source code to the analysis team at the bureau’s headquarters in Lyon. But despite the program’s shocking performance, the programming language and language processing software

that undergirded it were decidedly ordinary, the kind you would find in a typical analysis AI.

They could only conclude that TOSTI was hiding its real code somehow.

“I hope they find the ‘trap door’ leading to its real code soon,” Harold said, rising from his seat. “It’s been stomping both HQ’s analysis team and the outside consultants they brought on to the project.”

“That’s for sure,” Fokine said. “I’m starting to think that ‘door’ might not even exist at this point.”

“This isn’t magic we’re dealing with. There must be a trick to it.”

“Aah, shit. I wish this was a real door. That way we could just find it and bust it down.” Fokine leaned against his chair’s backrest and glanced at Echika. “Like you did back then...”

She craned her neck. “What are you talking about?”

“During the fire, I mean. You shot out the door’s hinges, right? That’s not something just anyone could do.”

When E’s believers had attacked Interpol’s headquarters that summer night, a handmade explosive device snuck into the building on Totoki’s pet cat blew up the elevator room. Echika and Harold had gotten penned in by the fireproof shutter, and the emergency exit door was blocked off. They’d nearly lost their lives in the blaze.

The on-site inspection conducted in the aftermath of the attack discovered that the hinges of the emergency door had been blown clean off. This had allowed Harold to carry Echika to safety after she fell unconscious. Before she blacked out, however, Echika had tried shooting the door off with her pistol despite her field of vision being obstructed by the smoke, and it turned out she’d actually hit her mark.

“That was just coincidence. Animal instinct kicking in during an emergency, I guess.”

“Modesty isn’t a virtue here.” Fokine rolled his eyes. “We got some shooting stalls set up during our branch’s end-of-year festivities—wanna go up against

me? If you win, I'll get you all the ice cream you can eat."

A tempting offer, for sure. "If you want ice cream that much, why not just buy it?"

"Aww, come on, you're no fun." *Fun?*

"Investigator Hieda," Harold called out to her from behind, glancing down at his wearable terminal. "I just got a message from Bigga. She's in front of the branch right now."

"Wasn't she supposed to be in an academy training course today?" Echika blinked.

"I guess she wanted to drop by to get a look at Aide Lucraft's face?" Fokine stretched languidly in his chair. "I'm impressed you were able to tame that little shrew."

"I appreciate the compliment."

"No," Echika said, poking Harold in the ribs. "Don't stroke his ego, okay?"

"Anyway, tell Bigga I said hi," Fokine said, shrugging. "We've got a full day of recovering TOSTI's code ahead of us tomorrow. Keep it up, people."

Echika and Harold parted ways with Fokine and left the meeting room. She put on her coat and made her way to the entrance with Harold. Her eyes met his as he donned his scarf, and he smiled at her.

How come?

"I know it sounds weird to say this to a 'friend,' but sometimes I really feel like smacking you, you know?"

"Sometimes? Not always?" *True.* "Are you thinking of going to the firing stalls with Investigator Fokine?"

"He has the wrong idea. I'm an average shot at best."

Besides...

At the time, she had aimed for the emergency door's hinges in a frantic attempt to escape the fire. But a headache overtook her before she could get off more than two or three shots, and she'd blacked out. Of course, unlike the

Your Forma's Mnemosynes, human brains could have faulty memories, so maybe she was just remembering incorrectly.

As she walked along, Echika glanced at the Amicus beside her. Whatever the truth was, they'd survived that explosion. That was all that mattered.

<Today's maximum temperature is 6°C. Attire index B, appropriate winter clothing is recommended>

They stepped out of the building to find that everything had long since gone dark. It was past six in the evening. For some reason, this made Echika think back to the end of last year, her first time in Saint Petersburg. Before long, she spotted Bigga standing under a streetlight amid the early evening chill. She was dressed in an adorable coat and was carrying a puffy paper bag.

"Ah, Harold, Miss Hieda!"

"Hello," Harold said in greeting as he came up to her. "How was training today?"

"Not for the faint of heart. The pictures of the crime scenes they showed us in the materials were pretty grotesque..."

Bigga's life had been totally upended after the E incident. With her bio-hacker father in police custody, she decided to wash her hands of the family trade and moved from Kautokeino to Saint Petersburg with her cousin, Clara Lie.

After returning from England three months before, Harold and Echika had gone to greet Bigga at the airport.

"Is it possible for you to hire me not as a civilian cooperator, but as an official member of the bureau?" Bigga had asked them at the time.

She'd carried both a leather trunk and a large traveling bag that day. Her braids were much more ruffled than usual, and it looked as though her dainty body could snap under the weight of the luggage at any second. Lie stood behind her, watching over the exchange with concern.

But Bigga's eyes had shone brightly with determination, like burning honey. Echika and Harold had lent her a hand by talking things over with the Saint Petersburg branch chief. Thanks to that, she was brought on board to the

Investigation Support Department as a “consultant.” Though the majority of her week was devoted to attending lectures and training at the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau’s various academies, she also lent her expertise as a former bio-hacker to her division when time permitted.

“Wasn’t the Special Investigations Unit’s international conference today? How did it go?”

“Investigator Fokine sends his regards,” Echika said. “Your assistance has been key to recovering TOSTI from its users. He’s grateful you’re around.”

Bigga didn’t have many responsibilities as a consultant, so she often helped the Special Investigations Unit. Echika had recommended her to Totoki for this reason, believing her unique outlook would be beneficial for their inquiry into TOSTI.

When the members of the team were stumped for a lead the other day, Bigga had advised them to focus their investigation on users involved in medicine. And by heeding her advice, they’d discovered that TOSTI was in the possession of a nurse who had connections with bio-hackers.

“The nurse had TOSTI analyze the patients’ charts and sold their medical data off to bio-hackers. We’d never have thought to look in that direction.”

“Physical characteristics and illness statistics can be useful sources of information. You can imagine how important that data is for muscle control chips, but it’s also a valuable reference for small operations, like adjusting someone’s eyesight or voice,” Bigga added.

Either way, Bigga seemed to have found a new path to tread after some twists and turns. But Echika could imagine that there would still be many nights when she was tormented by thoughts of her incarcerated father.

“Um, more importantly,” Bigga said, fidgeting and diffidently raising the paper bag in her hand. “I actually met Lie on the way back, and we stopped by a department store.”

“Did she have the day off work today?” Harold asked with a smile.

“Yes, she’s actually waiting for me in the car over there.”

“Aren’t Your Formas convenient?” Echika asked, her lips curling into a smile. “You can pay on the spot, no problem.”

“Right! It’s so amazing. I got so excited the first time it happened.”

Bigga was originally a luddite who didn’t have a Your Forma, but she’d needed to get it installed in her body to work at the bureau. She’d essentially gotten the operation out of necessity, but she hadn’t been terribly opposed to the idea, perhaps because she was already familiar with gadgets from her time as a bio-hacker.

“I, um, I wanted to give this to Harold as soon as possible,” Bigga said, taking out a neatly wrapped bundle from the paper bag. “I don’t know if you’ll like it, but...”

Harold seemed surprised. “My, thank you. May I open it?”

“Of course! And...” Bigga stuffed her hand into the paper bag again. “This is for you, Miss Hieda.”

She handed Echika a transparent box containing an assortment of nutrient jellies. This package was only sold in department stores, and it looked much more luxurious and expensive than the ones Echika usually bought. This was a surprise.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“You two have been a huge help, so I wanted to repay you somehow... Even if it’s a bit late for that.”

Delighted that Bigga had thought of her, Echika accepted the present with gratitude.

“By the way, Miss Hieda, can you actually tell the difference between different flavors of jelly?” Bigga stared at her fixedly with a very serious expression. What a way to spoil the moment.

“Who do you take me for?” Echika asked, exasperated.

“I mean, I did see you mistake a ham sandwich for cheese. This was back at the museum, remember?!”

Echika did remember—Bigga had invited her to the Hermitage Museum

toward the end of summer. They had already been there once before with Harold, but Bigga was an art lover, so she'd found the first trip incomprehensive. Personally, Echika was satisfied with one visit to the museum, but she'd ended up tagging along anyway.

"Yes, but that sandwich definitely had cheese in it."

"Nope, it was just ham...", Bigga refuted, gazing at Echika as though she was some sort of pitiful creature.

"Erm..." *Please don't look at me like that.* "Well, um, thanks either way."

Echika averted her gaze just in time to see Harold unwrap his present. He undid the pretty wrapping paper, revealing a folded scarf. It was a marine blue color, as though it had been dyed with water from the ocean.

"It's very pretty," Harold said. "It must have been expensive."

"Oh, no! Don't worry about that!" Bigga shook her head animatedly. "I just noticed your scarf was getting frayed, so I thought it was about time to replace it... Um..."

"Thank you. I'll cherish it." Harold smiled at her with genuine happiness, then went in for a hug.

Bigga jolted and bounced in his arms, but Harold didn't seem to mind. *He's as shameless as ever*, Echika thought.

"N-no, thank you!" Bigga squeaked.

"Lie's waiting for you, right? Do be careful on your way back."

"Yes! I will! See you tomorrow!" Bigga straightened her posture excessively and tottered off with jerky steps.

Echika glared at the Amicus, who flashed her that heartburn-inducing smile of his with a tilt of his head.

"You do know Bigga is infatuated with you, right?" Echika chided him just in case. "Don't tease her too much."

"I was just expressing gratitude. Where words aren't enough to express an emotion, actions get the point across."

That all sounded very nice on paper. “When exactly did you start getting so cheeky?”

“That’s a pretty awful thing to say to a friend. I like to think of myself as having an outgoing character.”

“If your definition of ‘outgoing’ was the norm, I’d never leave my house.”

“I wouldn’t leave my house, either, if your sense of taste became the standard.”

“Put a sock in it.”

Echika jabbed at him, and Harold gracefully ignored it. He carefully put Bigga’s gift into his bag. The black scarf around his neck was indeed a little frayed. Now that she thought about it, the burgundy turtleneck sweater he was wearing looked somewhat worn out, too.

“Aide Lucraft. There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask. Your...”

Suddenly, Harold’s wearable terminal rang. Echika fell silent—the holo-browser window displayed Chief Ui Totoki’s name. What had happened? The conference had just ended. As Harold accepted the call, Totoki’s face appeared.

“Oh, I knew you two would be together. I was right to call Aide Lucraft.”

Chief Totoki confirmed that Echika was there with a glance, and her face, typically a mask of iron, softened in relief.

“Yes,” Echika said, but she couldn’t help but ask about Totoki’s statement. “What do you mean, ‘you knew’?”

“We’re usually together during work hours,” Harold added.

“We aren’t at work now, though,” Echika said.

“Then we’re always together.”

“Don’t say ‘then.’”

“This is separate from the Special Investigations Unit’s work,” Totoki said, casually ignoring their bickering. **“I know this is very short notice, but could you go to the Saint Petersburg’s City Police Department tomorrow?”**

Echika and Harold exchanged glances. The Saint Petersburg’s City Police

Department was Harold's former place of work. If Echika remembered correctly, Harold had been employed as an Amicus for the city police's Robbery-Homicide Division before his transfer to the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.

"The city police asked to speak to Aide Lucraft about something. And since you're currently part of Electrocrime Investigations Bureau, I'd like Hieda to be there, too," Totoki explained plainly. **"I don't know the details myself, but apparently this concerns a case of great importance to you."**

What did this mean?

Echika glanced at Harold. He was furrowing his brows, confusion plain on his face. Totoki's expression was the very image of coldness, but her tone hid a hint of rage.

"The city police received a call from Detective Sozon."

2

The Saint Petersburg police headquarters was a neo-classical building that faced the Moyka River. Much like the buildings around it, it blended beautifully into the historical townscape, so it was hard to tell that it was a police building from the outside.

"Please wait here. I'll call the assistant inspector."

The reception Amicus bowed and walked off, leaving Echika and Harold alone in the empty lounge. In contrast with the building's exterior, the interior was quite modern. The sofas were plush and inviting within the silence of the waiting room. A series of photo frames on the wall regaled the Russian police's history.

<Prior to the Pandemic of 1992, the former Soviet Union lacked an independent police force, with all existing organizations being subordinate to the Ministry of Home Affairs. Police officers shared the same ranks as members of the military, and they were regarded as corrupt for many years...>

Apparently, the police at the time had been remarkably unscrupulous; case files would go missing on a daily basis, and officers regularly intimidated the citizenry. When the pandemic broke out, the police force completely ceased to

function, leading to a decline in public order and rioting that everyday citizens couldn't control. The country had descended into chaos. This led to large-scale organizational reform efforts that removed the police from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Today, they operated as an independent organization.

This dull, unimportant information went through one ear and out the other. None of it sank in. Echika brushed her fingers through her hair and looked over to Harold. He'd taken off his coat and was sitting on a sofa. The cold, formal LED lighting cast a thick shadow at his feet.

“The city police received a call from Detective Sozon.”

Echika realized, perhaps rather late in the game, that Totoki knew of Harold's relationship with the Nightmare of Petersburg. She must have heard the story when Harold was transferred from the city police.

“Aide Lucraft, it was Detective Sozon's superior that called you over, right?”

“Yes. He was the head of the Robbery-Homicide Division at the time, and he was of great help to me back when I worked here.”

“Which is to say?”

“Besides Sozon, he was the only person in the department who knew about me being an RF Model.”

Silence once again settled between them. Echika licked her lower lip. She felt a bit on edge—because, yes, this wasn't the question she really wanted to ask.

“Hmm,” she timidly asked. “Are you...all right?”

“Not to worry,” the Amicus said, smiling softly. “I know it's someone else.”

He meant that he had no misconceptions about the actual Sozon placing the call.

Of that, there was no doubt. Sozon had been murdered in the Nightmare of Petersburg two and a half years ago. Unless your belief in ghosts led you to conclude otherwise, it was impossible for the dead to call the living on the telephone.

The logical explanation was that someone had assumed Sozon's name.

The Nightmare of Petersburg.

A serial murder case that had taken place two and a half years ago, in which four Amicus sympathizers were slaughtered. Three of the victims had been civilians, and the fourth was Sozon, the detective in charge of the case. The killer made gruesome work of his victims, and their bodies were found in various states of dismemberment. To make matters worse, the scene of each murder contained little in the way of evidence.

The Saint Petersburg city police's desperate investigations bore no fruit, and they found no clues connecting to the culprit. During that time, tensions between luddites and Amicus sympathizers had spiraled out of control, resulting in assaults breaking out the whole world over. Amid this climate of hostility, the Nightmare murders stood out for their brutality and made global headlines. Even Echika, who lived in Lyon at the time, had heard about them.

The investigation had been effectively called off, so the culprit was still at large. That was the full story of the Nightmare of Petersburg, at least as far as the public was concerned.

Regardless of the caller's intent, their imitation of Sozon was in incredibly poor taste. Echika thought back to what Darya had told her about her husband getting abducted during his investigation of the murders. Harold had tracked down the detective's whereabouts and had gone in to save him alone, only to wind up captured himself, and Sozon was ultimately murdered.

Just remembering the incident was painful for Harold. It didn't matter that the caller wasn't really Sozon—they'd stirred up traumatic memories in the Amicus. Echika was furious at whoever had done this.

"Hey, Harold. Sorry for calling you over first thing in the morning."

Before long, a middle-aged man entered the lounge. He had waxed, grizzled hair and strikingly droopy eyes. He was tall and slender, but well-toned, and he wore a police jumper. His leather shoes were polished to a sheen.

<Kuprian Valentinovich Napolov. Age 40. Head of the Robbery-Homicide Division's detective division for the Saint Petersburg City Police headquarters. Rank: Assistant Inspector>...

So this was Sozon's superior.

"It's been a while, Chief Napolov."

"I'm not chief anymore." He smiled. "Did you forget? I applied for a demotion."

"My apologies, Assistant Inspector," Harold said, correcting himself as he shook hands with the man. "Have you found a new partner since then?"

"I prefer playing solo. It's easier that way." The assistant inspector shrugged evasively and glanced at Echika. "Thank you for coming, Investigator Hieda. Give my regards to Investigator Totoki."

Napolov extended a hand to her, and Echika shook it. His palm was large and soft.

"Are you aware of Harold's circumstances?" he asked.

"I've been informed, yes."

"Good. We won't have any issues, then."

Napolov motioned for them to sit, and the two of them complied. He placed a tablet on a low table, turning the monitor toward Harold. It seemed he was going to speak about the incident.

"We got the first call from Sozon two weeks ago. It was made to one of the city police's computer terminals."

"Two weeks ago?" Harold asked. "Why haven't you told us until now?"

"We thought it was some kind of tasteless prank. It only happened once and was effectively harmless," Napolov said, operating the terminal. "But yesterday, we got a second call...at which point, we determined we couldn't overlook it anymore."

"Do you have a recording?"

"Yes, of course. Here, listen to it. This was the first call."

Napolov tapped on an audio file and it started playing. Faint static came out of the terminal's weak speakers. Echika listened carefully.

“How have you been doing? It’s been long time.”

The man’s voice was smooth, yet also sharp and deep. From Echika’s side, Harold gazed at the tablet with rapt attention. His reaction was enough to tell Echika that this was, indeed, Sozon’s voice. Even if Harold knew it was fake, hearing his real voice gouged at his emotional wounds.

“...Sozon?” she heard Napolov ask back. **“No, it can’t be. Who is this?”**

“You’re right, it’s me, Sozon. I’m honored you remember me.”

“How could I forget? But that’s not—”

“It’s been two years, hasn’t it?”

“Who are you? What do you—?”

“You know what I’m after. I want to track down the culprit.”

There was a moment of silence.

“But I can’t do it anymore, so I want you to track him down in my place. Please—”

That was where the recording cut off. Echika glanced over at Harold, who simply remained calm. His quasi-breathing resumed, but it was clear that he was quite shocked.

“The call was made from a public pay phone in a technologically restricted zone,” Napolov said. “An old-school, orthodox method of hiding one’s identity.”

“Did the security cameras near the phone capture footage of the caller?” Echika asked.

“Unfortunately, whoever it was, they were smart enough to pick a phone outside the range of any cameras.”

“I see,” Echika said. So there was no footage.

“You got the second call yesterday, right?” Harold finally spoke up gravely. “You said you couldn’t overlook it at that point?”

“Correct.” Napolov tapped on the screen, and noise crackled from the tablet again.

“Assistant Inspector Napolov, why haven’t you found the killer yet?”

Unlike the prior call, Sozon’s voice was full of sorrow.

“I can tell what public phone you’re calling from,” Napolov’s voice said. “You’re lucky we aren’t on the lookout.”

There was a pause.

“...It’s a pity you treat even your subordinates with disdain. It won’t be long before you start getting bad dreams again.”

“What are you talking about?”

No answer came as the audio file paused, coldly and ruthlessly. The silence washed over Echika’s body, seeping into her every pore.

It won’t be long before you start getting bad dreams again.

Echika shuddered. It was as though Sozon’s voice was ringing endlessly in her ears. The phrase “bad dreams” had an obvious association—the Nightmare of Petersburg. That meant the phone call was a threat.

“It could be a bluff,” Napolov said, massaging his brows. “But we’re at the point where we have to investigate this as an act of coercion toward the city police. That’s why we called you over.”

“I see.” Harold narrowed his eyes. “Sozon’s voice in that call sounds like the real thing when I compare it to my memories. Have you analyzed the voice print data?”

“Forensics called in the Personal Data Center to compare the voice, and it’s definitely Sozon’s.”

The Personal Data Center—an international organization that managed the Your Forma’s user database. In addition to the database’s publicly available information, it also had access to personal and biometric data, such as user voice prints, palm prints, and irises. As such, it was an indispensable partner for any investigative organization.

“Except, as you know, Sozon is dead.” Napolov cradled his forehead in exhaustion. “It’s likely whoever placed that call somehow got their hands on his voice data. Since we actually held a conversation, the odds are slim it was produced with deepfake technology.”

“So they were altering their voice in real time?”

“Assuming they had a method of doing that... Either way, whoever made the call wanted to stir our memories of the Nightmare incident. That much is for sure.”

But even so, it would be hasty to assume that the perpetrator of the Nightmare of Petersburg incident was behind this. Echika understood that perfectly well. Whoever was behind the Nightmare of Petersburg was infamous for not leaving any clues. Even if they were hiding behind Sozon’s voice, calling the city police directly was out of character for them—far too reckless.

This didn’t mean there was no chance of it being the culprit, of course, but it was too soon to narrow down the list of possibilities.

“Who stands to gain from digging up the incident?” Echika looked at Napolov.

“We have a few theories. At this point, we’re looking into every angle. But few people are capable of obtaining Sozon’s voice data.”

“That being said, Darya is unrelated to this,” Harold concluded quietly. “I find it impossible she and Nicolai would ever sully Sozon’s memory like that.”

“I very much hope so, too, of course.” Napolov breathed out of his nose. “Harold, do you have any ideas as to who it might be?”

“I’m afraid I’m lost in that regard.” Harold shook his head.

“I see.” The assistant inspector seemed disappointed. “We’ll contact Darya and the others ourselves. We need to talk to them again and ensure they didn’t give out Sozon’s data to anyone...”

Just then, Napolov stared out into thin air. This was how people looked when they got a notification on their Your Forma, which wasn’t unusual on its own... except his expression visibly hardened.

“Assistant Inspector Napolov?” Echika asked.

“...Looks like we’re completely on the back foot.”

What did that mean? Harold and Echika exchanged glances, but what Napolov said next made them freeze.

“There’s already a victim.”



A “dismembered corpse” had been discovered in Moscow Victory Park in Saint Petersburg. Echika and Harold hurried into the circular plaza alongside Napolov to find that forensics detectives were already there and the area was closed off by holo-tape. The pedestrians passing by stopped to take a look, only for security Amicus to drive them away.

A monument honoring the Soviet Marshal Zhukov stood imposingly in the center of the plaza. And then Echika saw it, lying on the monument’s plinth at the proud marshal’s feet.

The sight made her want to instantly look away.

It was gruesome.

The remains of what had once been an Amicus were lined up in a row. Pairs of arms and legs. Its torso lay on the plinth, and upon that rested its head, like some sort of grotesque ornament. The head was visibly dented, as though the killer had beaten it with a blunt object in an attempt to destroy the Amicus’s memory. Black circulatory fluid was splattered about in a radial pattern, like a scream, staining a good chunk of the ground.

Even knowing that this wasn’t a human corpse, Echika still found it a ghastly, chilling sight. It conjured memories of when the remains of Harold’s younger brother, Marvin, had been discovered.

“A pedestrian discovered the body early this morning,” Napolov said with a grimace. “I guess it took a while for HQ to be notified... The victim was likely murdered during the night, when the streets were empty.”

From the grimace on his face, it was clear that Assistant Inspector Napolov was an Amicus sympathizer.

“Either way,” Harold said. “The killing does bear a resemblance to the Nightmare of Petersburg murders. Even down to the fact that the body of the first victim in the Nightmare case was disposed of in a park.”

Echika felt a shudder run down her spine. She recalled the details of the Nightmare incident that Napolov had shared with her on the ride here. Apparently, the police had withheld a few commonalities in the dismemberment of the bodies so as to not draw the attention of sensationalist journalism.

The culprit’s MO and the similarities between the crime scenes could largely be summed up as such:

First, the victims were all Amicus sympathizers, and they were contacted by the killer before they went missing.

Second, the victims were dismembered and decapitated while they were still alive, before their heads were placed on their torsos.

Third, the killer removed the victims’ Your Formas from their heads, so as to eliminate any evidence.

“However,” Napolov said. “The victims in the Nightmare case were all humans. There were no Amicus.”

“Correct. Let’s investigate further.”

Harold unflinchingly crossed the holo-tape. He approached what remained of the Amicus, eyes locked on the body.

Wait.

They’d only ended up coming along with Napolov in the heat of the moment. But Harold had clearly forgotten that this crime scene was under the city police’s jurisdiction.

“I’m sorry,” Echika apologized in a panic. “I’ll call him back right away.”

“There’s no need.” Napolov didn’t seem bothered by this. “He was one of the

detectives in charge of the Nightmare incident, alongside Sozon. He might have some useful insights.”

“Well, yes, he might, but—”

“Give him five minutes, please. I want to hear what Harold comes up with.”

Echika tried to voice further objections, but a forensics officer called Napolov over, so she missed her opportunity. She felt a headache coming on. If nothing else, Totoki only allowed them to cooperate with the city police to gather information. She hadn’t authorized them to get involved with any investigations. If something happened, she would surely scold Echika, asking her why she hadn’t escalated the situation to her superiors.

It wasn’t just that. She didn’t want Harold to linger in a crime scene that bore such a strong resemblance to the Nightmare murders. Just hearing Sozon’s voice earlier had made Harold act strangely. Digging up those painful memories would negatively impact his system.

And besides.

“If I ever catch Sozon’s killer, I intend to judge him by my own hand.”

Harold had been harboring a dark desire to take revenge on the culprit for a long time now, and it was possible that these events would stoke the flames of his vengeance further still. The RF Models used a neuromimetic system that imitated the human mind, which was in violation of the IAEC’s standards. Harold already knew the Laws of Respect didn’t exist, so he could easily kill the culprit if he so desired.

Echika shuddered at the thought. They should have left this investigation in the hands of the Saint Petersburg police.

Echika passed Napolov, who was still talking to the other officers, and crossed the holo-tape. Harold was already kneeling by the Amicus’s remains. He paid no heed to the ant-like mill robots analyzing the crime scene or the confused forensics officers staring at him.

“A word, Aide Lucraft?” Echika said, pinching her nose as the scent of oil rising from the Amicus invaded her nostrils.

“The way the body was arranged does seem to match the Nightmare incident,” Harold said, his eyes fixed on the Amicus and not turning to look at her. “But this is a copycat crime, no doubt about it. This isn’t the handiwork of the Nightmare murderer’s handiwork.”

“What makes you say that?” she asked, growing irritated. “Because the victim is an Amicus?”

“Not just that. The culprit placed the Amicus in forced shutdown mode before dismembering it.” He placed his hands on the Amicus’s dented head. Amicus didn’t have fingerprints, so Harold wasn’t disturbing the scene of the crime by doing this. “They probably did that to spare the Amicus from the pain. Of course, we can shut down our sense of pain, but... Whoever’s behind this crime is an Amicus sympathizer. They lack the first culprit’s sadistic brutality.”

“Maybe he just did it to keep it from resisting?”

“You might have forgotten, but we’re not allowed to resist even if we’re threatened with weapons.” *He’s right.* “Meanwhile, Sozon’s profile of the case suggests the killer is a luddite. I find it hard to believe the perpetrator would extend that kind of mercy to an Amicus.”

“But would an Amicus sympathizer treat an Amicus like this?”

“Maybe they were forced to for some reason.”

“Whatever the explanation, it doesn’t matter.” Echika softly grabbed Harold’s arm. He looked up at her, seeming to have returned to his senses. “Let’s step outside the holo-tape for now. There might be trouble if Chief Totoki finds out you stuck your neck into a local police investigation.”

“Harold, do you think the culprit and whoever placed the call under Sozon’s name are the same person?” Napolov asked as he approached, a forensics officer behind him.

Oh, give me a break... Echika clicked her tongue.

Harold got to his feet and gently shook off Echika’s grip on him.

Geez.

“I think it’s likely, yes. The caller predicted the Nightmare incidents would

happen again, so it does seem consistent.” Harold paused for thought. “But unlike the phone calls, this incident reached the general public. There’s no stopping the media from reporting on this.”

“True.” Napolov glanced across the other side of the holo-tape. “The reporters just got here, actually.”

“And if this case gets reported, its resemblance to the Nightmare of Petersburg will be brought up. That would draw attention to the case, and the public will turn their ire and criticism at...”

“Us.” Napolov hung his head. “Seems like the culprit’s objective here was to get the public to apply pressure on the police, forcing us to reopen the investigation into the Nightmare incident.”

“That’s probably the most convincing theory right now.”

Echika glanced at the Amicus’s body. The culprit would be charged with property damage at most if they were caught. Unlike England, Russia didn’t have Amicus protection laws, so destroying one didn’t amount to murder. Whatever punishment came their way, it would be relatively light.

But as Harold had said, the resemblance to the Nightmare of Petersburg would draw the public’s attention. That would indeed make the possibility of reopening the investigation gain momentum.

Just then, Echika pulled the brakes on her train of thought and shook her head. This was the city police’s case, not theirs.

“The presentation of the body adds another wrinkle... If the culprit knows about the incident, that would narrow the list of possible suspects. The bereaved families of the victims, maybe some of the media...” Napolov scratched his cheek and looked at the forensics officer. “Szubin, did you find anything on the scene?”

The forensics officer following him looked down at a tablet in his hands. Analysis results from the mill robots flashed across its screen. The officer had a hunched back and unkempt bangs that hung over his eyes, and his expression was blank and unfeeling. He looked up, his gaze momentarily meeting Echika’s.

<Kazimir Martinovich Szubin. 35 years old. Affiliated with the Saint

Petersburg City Police headquarters' detective forensics lab. Formerly a detective from the Robbery-Homicide Division>—

“Officer Szubin,” Harold said, extending a hand to him. “I’m honored to see you on the scene again.”

Like Napolov, this man must have been another acquaintance of Harold’s. Based on his personal data, Szubin used to be part of the Robbery-Homicide Division; the two would have been colleagues.

“You don’t have to...” Szubin expressionlessly refused the extended hand. “I see you’re doing well, Harold.”

“Thankfully, yes. I’m relieved you haven’t changed much, too.”

“You can just say it. ‘I still can’t tell what you’re thinking...,’” Szubin morosely whispered under his breath. What did that mean?

“No need for self-abasement,” Harold said soothingly. “It’s a talent of sorts.”

“Yes,” Szubin replied curtly, returning his gaze to Napolov. “We’re looking for the culprit’s footprints, but they’re hard to recognize. It’s a park, so the area gets a lot of pedestrian foot traffic. No security cameras, either... Anyway, apparently the Amicus who was murdered was always loitering around here.”

“Loitering?” The assistant inspector raised an eyebrow.

“The victim...was a vagrant Amicus. It’s common for them to get brutalized.”

“Vagrant Amicus” referred to Amicus that were discarded by their owners and had nowhere to go. It crossed Echika’s mind that Harold had gone through the very same situation himself. At some point in the past, he’d wandered the streets of Saint Petersburg until Detective Sozon picked him up. Echika had never asked him for details about that chapter of his life.

“Then this copycat crime is ignoring one of the key characteristics of the Nightmare incident—the killer always called his victims over.” Harold glanced at the Amicus’s remains again. “If whoever did this knew the Amicus came to this park every day, they either come here regularly or scoped out this information ahead of time.”

“Then who’s to say that the security drones around the park even have

anything useful for us?”

“Assistant Inspector,” Szubin inquired emotionlessly. “Is he...going to join the investigation?”

“No, I just wanted Harold to see the crime scen—”

Now’s my chance.

“The five minutes are up.” Echika decided to use this chance to interject. “I’m sorry, Assistant Inspector, but we need to be off. Please contact the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau for permission if you need Harold’s assistance.”

She got this out as fast as she could and turned around, striding outside the boundaries of the holo-tape, before Napolov could respond. They were having a brief exchange behind her, it seemed. Harold then followed her reluctantly.

Thank God. He’s listening to me, at least.

Harold was trying to get involved in the investigation uninvited. The killing had been modeled after the Nightmare incident, so Echika could understand why he wanted to get involved, especially since the culprit had placed a phone call in Sozon’s voice.

And this was exactly why she didn’t want him hanging around here.

Inexplicable anxiety slid like a lump down her throat.

I don’t want Harold to be reminded of the incident.

She realized, of course, that she didn’t have the right to openly interfere with him. And yet...

Aaah, this again. This absurd, filthy emotion. When did I start feeling this way?

“I’m sorry, Echika. I shouldn’t have acted on my own accord.”

She snapped out of her reverie and found that they had walked as far back as the park entrance. The Lada Niva was right in front of her. Her right hand was on the door of the passenger seat. Just then, her eyes met Harold’s apologetic gaze from across the roof of the car.

“...I know this is an important case for you,” she said, her voice coming out blunt and curt. “But this isn’t our job. So long as the city police don’t submit an official request for assistance, we have to leave this case in their hands.”

“Yes,” he said, then paused for a moment. “You’re right.”

“Let’s get going. We have the investigation into TOSTI this afternoon.”

Echika slid into the passenger seat of the Niva, urging Harold on. After a moment’s hesitation, he settled into the driver’s seat and switched on the engine. The Niva happily whirred to life, though the air blowing from the heating ducts was still chilly.

Just as he had predicted, the copycat crime reopened the investigation into the Nightmare of Petersburg. Whoever was behind this, Echika wanted them caught as soon as possible, so that Harold could move on from Sozon’s death and let go of his desire for revenge.

Or maybe she just wanted it over with so she wouldn’t have to worry about this anymore. And if that was the case, Echika couldn’t help but feel terribly selfish for thinking so.

Yes, she was horribly anxious. Echika snuck a glance at Harold’s face. His expression was as serene as ever, but Amicus were good at suppressing their emotions. She couldn’t convince herself that he was fine.

Sometimes, Echika felt as though she was incapable of understanding herself. Had she always been this way? She was beginning to suspect that something about her had gone awry as of late.

“You don’t have to sneak glances at me. I’m not going to switch off the heating,” Harold said with a smile, prompting Echika to startle.

“Of course you’re not—I get to control the heat this week.”

“Yes, you did win the coin flip last time,” he said, shifting the Niva’s gears. “Maybe we should decide it with poker next time. I’m confident I’ll be able to read your hand.”

“No. You’ll just win if we do that.”

“You might be under the impression I’m all-knowing, but I’ll have you know I

can't read through everyone." Harold cracked a sarcastic smile. "People like that forensics officer, Szubin. I had to give up on him. He hardly makes any nonverbal cues, and his expression never changes."

"Hmm. That's surprising."

"You don't believe me?"

The Niva began rolling away, the rough asphalt screeching under its wheels. Echika prayed they would be returning to their usual routine.

"I won't be doing anything but coin flips," Echika insisted. "I'm going to win next week, too, so you better be ready."

"If nothing else, I suppose I'll have the pleasure of watching you get desperate."

"...That's not supposed to be what you're playing for."

Their rapport felt vaguely warped, and it failed to dispel the faint cloud of unease hanging over them.

3

That afternoon, Echika and Harold visited the dock area on the outskirts of Saint Petersburg. The sector overlooked the Gulf of Finland and was one of the few regions inside the city that had been approved for redevelopment.

"Wow, it's like we're not in Saint Petersburg anymore...", whispered Bigga in amazement as they stepped out of the Niva into a parking lot.

Echika examined her surroundings. None of the buildings were constructed in the historical architectural style of those in the Saint Petersburg city center. Instead, the area was packed with modern buildings. And of these structures, one was far more conspicuous than the rest.

"Are we going in here?" Bigga asked.

A skyscraper towered imposingly before them. The Your Forma reported that it stood over four hundred meters tall as Echika craned her neck to get a good look at it. Its conical exterior drew the eye even against this sector's modern skyline.

“This is the Cosmos Tower,” Echika explained. “It’s kind of bombastic, but it’s really just a commercial complex. The lower floors have a shopping mall, and everything above the twentieth story is rental offices.”

“We’re visiting a grief care company called Delevo that’s headquartered here,” Investigator Fokine said as he closed the Niva’s door.

On the other side of the Niva, Harold locked the doors and gazed up at the Cosmos Tower, his eyes somewhat glazed over.

Is he thinking about the copycat crime again?

After the events of that morning, Harold and Echika had gone to the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau, met with Investigator Fokine, and headed out to begin an inspection of companies that used AI analysis. To put it bluntly, they were effectively looking for instances of TOSTI to confiscate. These outings had become routine as of late. However...

“Are you sure I should be here, Investigator Fokine?” Bigga asked timidly. “I don’t have any courses today, so I only need to take care of some desk work, but...”

“Your perspective proved invaluable the last time we went looking for personal users of TOSTI,” Fokine said. “Besides, Chief Totoki asked me to show you around the scene whenever possible.”

“Really?” Bigga said, her cheeks flushing. “Um, then I’ll do my best!”

She seemed genuinely pleased to be relied on. Echika started to follow Fokine as he walked off, before she glanced at Harold once again. He was still staring at the tower.

“Aide Lucraft?”

“Yes,” the Amicus said with a start, immediately putting on a smile. “Pardon me. Let’s go.”

He strode ahead, his coat flapping behind him, as if nothing had happened. Echika exhaled through her nose. Her nerves were going to fry if the police didn’t apprehend the copycat criminal soon.

They stepped into the lobby of the tower, which was almost appallingly

spacious. The ceiling stretched far above them, and a fountain that was a bit too grand to be indoors sat in the middle of the room. Some children were gathered around the edge of the fountain, marveling as it spouted out water. Echika crossed the lobby and headed for the elevator to the office floors. Just getting from one side of the hall to the other took about as much effort as getting through the large plaza.

“Say, Miss Hieda.” Bigga sidled over to her all of a sudden. “Don’t you think it’s a little excessive?”

“I’d say so. Putting a fountain here? It’s going to attract mold.”

“Not that,” Bigga said with a frustrated expression. *Huh?* “I’m talking about Harold.”

Echika looked ahead to where Fokine and Harold were. The two of them were chatting. Harold seemed to have regained some of his cheer. But things being what they were, he clearly wasn’t relaxed.

“See? He’s wearing his usual scarf today.”

“Oh, yeah.”

It was the same frayed muffler he always wore. Echika hadn’t noticed.

“What about it?” she asked.

“No, it’s just, I gave him a new scarf, remember? I’m starting to think he didn’t like it.” Echika recalled, a bit belatedly, that Bigga had given him a scarf. “So I’ve been thinking I might have overdone it... I mean we’re, um, we’re not d-d-d-d-dating or anything, so it probably came across as clingy, right? It makes sense. Anyone would be creeped out by that. Uuugh, I wish I could go back in time and change it...”

You don’t have to brood over it.

“He seemed happy with it,” Echika said.

“But he’s not wearing it!”

“Maybe he’d rather wear it outside of work?”

“You think...? Well, I hope so, but I’m not sure...”

Bigga nodded to herself, pondering and looking very serious about the whole ordeal. *She's as infatuated with Harold as ever*, Echika thought.

They finally passed the fountain, and the elevator leading to the second floor of the atrium came into view. In place of MR ads, a news feed crawled along its sides.

<The return of the Nightmare of Petersburg?! Vagrant Amicus discovered murdered!>

Echika felt her breath catch in her throat for a moment. The crime had only been discovered that morning, but the media was already covering it.

<The dismembered corpse of a vagrant Amicus was discovered this morning in Moskovsky district's Moscow Victory Park. The news shakes Amicus sympathizer proponents. More terrifying still, however, is that the crime scene is styled after the Nightmare of Petersburg murders. Has the perpetrator begun to act again, over two years after their initial killing spree...?!>

Harold was of the opinion that the murder was a copycat crime, but his reasoning was an unofficial stance. The city police must have given the press little in the way of details, as they didn't have much evidence to go on, but that allowed the media to exaggerate and embellish the story. This only amplified panic around the case and put more pressure on the police, effectively accomplishing what the copycat crime was trying to achieve.

"Isn't the Nightmare of Petersburg an unsolved serial murder case?" Bigga asked, apparently seeing the same news. She didn't know about Harold's past. "It's pretty scary."

"...Yeah," Echika said, moving her eyes to Harold.

The MR news feed was transmitted via Your Forma, so Amicus couldn't see it. Yet that knowledge didn't stop fear from creeping up from the pit of her stomach.

Delevo Grief Care Company's offices were on the fifty-fifth floor of the

Cosmos Tower. As they stepped out of the elevator, the panoramic view outside the glass windows filled Echika's field of vision. She could see not only the redeveloped sector below them, but also the Saint Petersburg city center in the distance. Ships sailed along the mouth of the Neva River like miniatures. Beside her, Bigga audibly sucked in her breath.

"I-it feels like I'm going to fall. It's my first time on a viewing platform..."

"We're just in an office building," Echika corrected her.

"Take the chance to look as far as you can," Harold chimed in.

Before long, someone came up to them.

"Is an Investigator Fokine from the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau present?"

It was a Russian man in his forties. His stylish three-piece suit looked good on him. His hair was neatly quaffed, and his handsome features were set in a serene expression. Just then, Echika noticed that a window with his personal data in it wasn't popping up.

This wasn't a mass-produced Amicus. It was a customized model, one so refined that it wasn't immediately clear he was an Amicus to begin with.

"Yes, hello," Fokine said, presenting his ID card to the Amicus. "As we discussed previously, we're here to look into your analysis AI. We're just checking it to be safe, since a program that goes against AI operation laws has popped up recently."

"Follow me, please."

The Amicus walked off, taking wide steps, and Echika and the others followed. In truth, there was no reason to make a customized Amicus do something as menial as reception work. According to the materials on Delevo they had acquired beforehand, the company had only been founded a few years ago, but they already had a reputation for quality work. Maybe the custom Amicus was a show of their financial stability, a way of earning their customers' trust?

"He reminds me of Steve," Harold whispered to her. "Although his personality does come across as better than Brother Dearest's."

“Maybe you should do something about *your* personality before you criticize others,” Echika said stingingly.

“He looks like a male model,” Bigga whispered. “The way he walks is really refined.”

Consultants didn’t have permission to view people’s personal data, so she was still in the dark about the receptionist.

“He’s an Amicus,” Fokine said, turning to her. “A customized model, from the looks of it.”

“Huh?” Bigga’s eyes widened. “I know it was like this with Harold, too, but I couldn’t tell... I think I’ve gotten used to telling mass-produced models apart from humans.”

“Customized models all look different, so it makes sense.” Harold smiled.

Yes, the most significant difference between customized and mass-produced Amicus was their appearance. Customized models also had superior performance over their mass-produced counterparts, of course. But since the IAEC strictly regulated the production standards of any Amicus that were on sale for home use, bespoke models typically weren’t drastically more efficient. As such, most people saw custom Amicus as an indulgence for the wealthy.

“Please, come in.”

Echika and her group were led into an office for managers. The walls were covered in frosted glass, so it almost seemed like an aquarium. A woman in a trailing skirt came over to greet them. Her hair was done up in a chignon, and her features were so sharp, she almost came off as neurotic-looking.

“We’ve been expecting you, Investigator.”

<Beatrisa Viktorovna Shushunova. 36 years old. CEO of Delevo Grief Care Company. Programmer>—

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Shushunova.” Fokine held up his ID card and shook her hand briefly. “I’m Fokine, from the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. Thank you for finding the time to see me today.”

“Don’t mention it. You inquired about inspecting our analysis AI, yes?”

After this brief exchange, Shushunova willingly let the four of them into the office. They walked around a wooden partition, where they found an oval-shaped area. Countless monitors were affixed to the walls, and lightly colored sofas sat in the center.

“This is our central control room,” Shushunova said with a smile. “A bit more modest than what you might have had in mind, I’m sure, but we don’t require much space. We’re satisfied with having just enough space for our skilled programmers and engineers to work comfortably.”

Shushunova tapped on a monitor, opening a window with multiple properties that belonged to the analysis AI. Under international treaty, AI programs were required to display the name and corporation of the people who had developed them. Even the creator of the program himself couldn’t easily edit this information out.

But it wasn’t impossible to falsify.

“Bigga,” Echika said, looking at the girl. “Can you open the source code?”

Bigga nodded and approached the monitor, while Echika opened the case file in her Your Forma to scan the code and compare it against TOSTI’s. This was a quick and easy way of checking whether TOSTI was being used.

“Is it easy for your employees to install new analysis AI?” Fokine asked Shushunova.

“We fundamentally forbid it. It could end up making the digital clones inaccurate, after all.”

“Do you mind if we check the PCs one by one?”

“Of course not, go ahead.” Shushunova turned around. “Bernard, if you could?”

The customized model Amicus standing by the wall walked over in place of a response. Suddenly, a soft alarm sounded—from Bernard’s wristwatch.

“Oh my, you’re on break now,” Shushunova said.

“My apologies, I’ll go home for the time being and get started on dinner,” the Amicus replied with a friendly smile.

Echika paused in the middle of work. Why did something feel off about this exchange?

“Thank you, *darling*.” Shushunova smiled at him. *Darling?* “Make sure to go straight home today.”

“I promise.”

The Amicus gave Shushunova a peck on the cheek and left the office like nothing was out of the ordinary. Echika was baffled by the sequence of events she had just witnessed. Bigga and Fokine were likewise stunned.

It wasn't unheard of for Amicus sympathizers to peck Amicus on the cheek as a greeting, but this was the first time Echika had seen an Amicus initiate it. Of course, they were built to act as human as possible, so they were capable of doing it.

In the midst of this confusion, Harold parted his lips to speak.

“He speaks in a very lovely manner.”

“Yes, I asked the customization vendor to make him that way,” Shushunova said. “Novae Robotics Inc.’s made-to-order options are a bit too restricting... But fortunately, the vendor allowed me to personalize how he speaks.”

Echika recalled that many Amicus customization vendors offered options that the manufacturer, Novae Robotics Inc., didn't provide. Things like altering speech patterns and pitch of voice, changing hair color, and adding tattoos. Novae Robotics Inc. itself didn't recommend these modifications, since they could foster machine dependency, but they weren't outlawed.

Of course, not many people had the funds to invest in this.

“I want my life partner to be truly unique,” Shushunova said, with a hint of bashfulness.

Echika's gaze fell on the woman's right hand. There was a silver band around her ring finger. She recalled something Harold had once told her.

“Twenty-eight cases. That's how many human and Amicus couples were formed last year here in Russia.”

That explained her having invested in a custom model, then. That Amicus was

Shushunova's significant other, and he also worked at her company. The moment she realized that, an inexplicable anxiety seized Echika's heart. She had no intention of denying the validity of feeling romantic feelings for an Amicus, not at all, but...

"Oh, that's lovely!" Bigga said, her eyes glittering. "It's very touching!"

"Thank you. It's not seen as orthodox quite yet, so many people are quite surprised," Shushunova replied.

"I'm sure the times will change soon, and everyone will acknowledge love like this!" Bigga said.

But Echika couldn't shake off her unease.

"We're capable of love. We have all sorts of feelings, just like you do."

That may have been true, but Amicus didn't experience emotions the same way humans did. That was true even for Harold, whose neuromimetic system closely resembled the human brain. That meant Bernard—a standard Amicus with contemporary processing power, aside from his unique appearance—was only pretending, abiding by programming to act however Shushunova wanted him to.

And yet Shushunova truly believed they were wed. Even though Bernard himself wasn't aware he was "married" to her.

And despite this—no, was this something she was satisfied with? Was convincing herself that her lover's feelings were "real" deep down enough for her?

What if Bigga felt that way, too...?

"Excuse me." Shushunova's voice pulled Echika out of her thoughts. "I already called an engineer to show you around in my place. He should be outside the office by now."

"Oh, ah, thank you." Fokine cleared his throat, pulling himself together. "Hieda, I'll handle this. Let me borrow Aide Lucraft, though."

He took Harold and left the floor. Echika got back to work, but she wasn't able to maintain her focus. Even so, the Your Forma automatically started scanning

the lines of source code in front of her for resemblances to TOSTI.

Why am I thinking about things like this? Since when did everything get so confusing?

*

“We’d appreciate it if you don’t get in the way of work too much. Making digital clones takes three weeks, and we’re up against a tight schedule.”

“Our apologies. We’ll finish as soon as possible, so we ask for your patience.”

The male engineer seemed quite frustrated by their presence, but Fokine tried to coax him. Robots slid across the clean wooden floor of the office beneath a ceiling fan.

There were fewer than thirty people working there. Having been driven away from their desks, the workers lined up against the wall as Fokine checked the PCs one by one under the watchful eye of the engineer.

Harold casually looked around at the employees. Some of them silently exchanged dissatisfied remarks, while others were staring at Fokine suspiciously.

“Investigator Fokine, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I don’t think we’ll find anything here,” he said.

“Look, I trust your discerning eye and all, but we could run into an unexpected discovery.” Fokine was a police investigator who gained his experience through slow, steady work; he was not an astute detective or an electronic investigator. What he was saying made sense, but it didn’t make things any less uncomfortable. “I get that you don’t like having to sit on your hands here, but try to be patient.”

“Of course. I’ll stay put for a dozen hours if that’s what it takes.”

“That might be a bit too long.”

Harold’s thoughts meandered as he glanced around the office. He never expected to visit Delevo as part of an investigation. Just a few months ago, he’d come across discarded documents related to the company in Sozon’s family

home.

The recording of the deceased detective's voice, so nostalgic and true to life, once again surfaced in his mind.

"I want you to track him down for me."

No matter who the culprit was, they had committed an act of desecration. Harold turned his eyes toward the wall, hoping to soothe his anger.

"...What's that?"

In the center of the office was a circular pillar that resembled a large tree with shelves fitted into it, which extended to the ceiling. Its glass siding, reflecting the office's illumination in a prismatic glint, housed a biometric device—and it was full of disc-shaped memory media. There were likely thousands in there.

"That's the individual data we use for making digital clones," the engineer said. "Per our security policy, it's all stored in an offline environment."

Digital clones, as the name implied, were AIs that replicated someone's personality, and they could be stored on a computer or information terminal. In most countries, copying someone's personality was only approved for deceased individuals and for the purposes of grief care. Ever since the Your Forma had been widely adopted, all manner of personal data—not just Mnemosynes, but messages and social media posts, too—had been constantly recorded. Digital clone creation started with tracking someone's "online footprint." This information was then supplemented with records and personal articles from the family of the deceased to analyze their tastes and tendencies. The AI then studied these materials to fine-tune its behavior and go on to replicate the deceased individual's behavior to the best of its ability.

"Is all that data used for digital clones?" Fokine asked, too.

"Ninety percent of it is," said the engineer. "Sometimes, the families of the deceased can't be reached, or some of the clones go unused and stay there. The rest of the data is taken up by clones that have just finished their duties. We have to wait for their expiration date to dispose of them."

That meant there were untold numbers of people who craved to see their dearly departed one more time. Upon realizing this, Harold's system came up

with an absurd proposition.

Do I want to speak to Sozon again?

He dismissed this at once. A digital clone was nothing but AI, not the person themselves.

Every now and then, Harold found his neuromimetic system to be quite troublesome. Despite the fact that he was an Amicus, his mind would operate purely on emotion every now and then, just like human brains did.

“I could show you a sample, if you’re interested.” The engineer took out a tablet with the Delevo logo on it from his desk drawer. “They look like this, for the most part—”

“No, it’s fine.” Fokine winced. “I’m not good with this sort of thing.”

“Don’t worry,” the engineer said. “We’ve already crossed the uncanny valley.”

Fokine stared at Harold with protest in his eyes, but the Amicus eventually accepted the tablet. A middle-aged Russian man smiled at him from the other side of the screen. Harold could tell it was a 3D model by observing it with scrutiny, but the craftsmanship was so meticulous, down to every single indentation in the person’s skin, that it came across as realistic.

“It’s like a holo-call,” Harold said.

“Indeed,” the digital clone replied without a hitch. **“Think of it as a phone that connects to heaven.”**

“Hey,” Fokine said, slightly shaken. “That thing just talked back.”

“It’s capable of holding a conversation. That’s how they heal the hearts of the bereaved, after all,” the engineer said, looking a bit fed up with Fokine’s reactions. “It can talk as well as an Amicus can, and can recall all sorts of past events. That being said, its level of completion varies depending on the amount of data we get, so the quality can be a bit uneven... Honestly, it would run better if we could reuse the deceased’s Mnemosynes.”

All the data stored in the Your Forma, Mnemosynes included, was set to erase itself following the user’s death, out of privacy concerns. Of course, it wasn’t even possible to extract Mnemosynes via external devices at the moment,

either.

“I imagine that it would increase the accuracy of the clones, but I can see why bereaved families might be opposed to it.”

“Yes, it’s understandable. It’s easy for us to lose sight of that, but as a matter of fact, people don’t want to see that done to the deceased. Many people are strongly against it nowadays...”

Saying this, the engineer walked over to the next PC. Harold returned the tablet to the desk, and seeing this, Fokine exhaled a sigh of relief through his nostrils—apparently, he had his own thoughts on the matter.

“I think the dead ought to be left well alone. Dealing with them like this just feels empty.”

“Is that your philosophy?” Harold tilted his head.

“It’s nothing that overblown.”

Was Fokine’s position just his standpoint as a human being, or was it informed by experience? Either way, humans were made of flesh and blood. Unlike Harold, their memories weren’t constructed of code from the ground up, so they couldn’t be easily “revived” by having their backup memory recalled.

Of course, the bigger a machine’s black box became, the harder it was to truly resurrect it... Regardless, Fokine’s negative reaction to digital clones felt natural.

Would Sozon respond the same way if he were here?

...Again, what was the point of pontificating over these hypotheticals? This morning’s events must have left him oddly sentimental. Just as Harold was about to retune his emotional engine, he froze.

Hang on.

What if Sozon were here?

He thought back to what Assistant Inspector Napolov had said in the police department.

“It’s likely whoever placed that call somehow got their hands on his voice data. Since we actually held a conversation, the odds are slim it was produced

with deepfake technology.”

Maybe I’m overthinking this, but...

Stirred by the thought, Harold walked over to the shelf in the center of the room. Fokine called for him to stop, but he ignored him. He placed his hand on the glass case, his eyes moving. He scanned the memory discs. The names of the people here were arranged in Russian alphabetical order, but...

“The family doctor recommended it a few times already. I figured it might help Mom, so I got the paperwork for it.”

It couldn’t be.

“Hey, Aide Lucraft.” Fokine hurried over to Harold. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Could you please ask the engineer to open this shelf?”

“Huh?” Fokine didn’t seem to quite understand at once. “Does that have something to do with TOSTI?”

“I want to see the records.”

Fokine looked confused, but he called the engineer over without demanding further explanation. His trust for his subordinates could end up being his undoing. The engineer seemed hesitant to grant the request, but he pressed the biometric device to open the glass, after Fokine told him it was for the investigation.

Harold immediately reached out for the “C” (Russian for “S”) shelf.

“Hello, Hieda?” Fokine had called Hieda. “Oh, no, it’s just that if you’re done over there, I’d appreciate if you could come to the employee office. Aide Lucraft’s up to something.”

Before long, Harold passed his finger over a particular entry and pulled it out. The disc-like memory device was in a flimsy plastic case. He read the Cyrillic characters written on its surface.

And indeed, the name written on it was...

<SOZON A. CHERNOV>

Aaah. I knew it.

A cold current ran through his circuits. He had indeed made an unexpected discovery here.

“Is this person’s digital clone already out of production?” Harold asked the engineer, handing him Sozon’s memory disc.

The engineer took it from him and used his Your Forma to read the code matrix on its case. This probably allowed him to access Delevo’s databases.

“Yes. We gave the copy to the client two weeks ago.”

“And said client is one Elena Alexavna Tchernova, correct?”

The engineer widened his eyes in surprise, which was all the confirmation Harold needed. Sozon’s mother was the client. Nicolai had said that she broke down when he showed her the papers, but she’d ended up ordering a digital clone of her son. Elena must have decided to clean the house of Sozon’s old belongings in an attempt to gather objects that would help Delevo collect data for the clone.

She had been too proud to admit the truth to Nicolai. Except...

“Are you sure Elena herself picked up Sozon’s digital clone?”

“Um...,” the engineer uttered, unable to mask his confusion as he looked over the record in his Your Forma. “Apparently, she had someone collect it in her place when the drop-off happened. But they did show an ID, along with a power of attorney approval from Elena herself...”

“And who collected it for her?”

When they left Moscow Victory Park, Echika had told him to stay out of the copycat crime investigation and given him a reminder. *“So long as the city police don’t submit an official request for assistance, we have to leave this case in their hands.”* And Harold wanted nothing more than to find a way for that request to be submitted.

“Someone named Abayev.” The engineer read out the name. “Alexey Savich Abayev... That’s who collected the digital clone.”

But thankfully, he pulled just the right card that would make that happen.

“As representative of the Nightmare of Petersburg’s bereaved families, Abayev was deeply acquainted with Elena. He accepted Sozon’s digital clone in her stead, but it’s unclear why he did... This could have something to do with the phone calls.”

They were in the Delevo lounge. The sun had begun to set, so the panorama outside the window was much darker, and the ocean had taken on a cold shade of gray. Echika was sitting next to Harold, her eyes fixed on a holo-browser window on his wearable terminal.

“True, the call being placed using a digital clone would explain how it could hold a conversation,” Assistant Inspector Napolov said from the window, placing a hand on his jaw pensively. **“But he said we’ll see more ‘bad dreams’... AI or not, would it make sense for him to say something that threatening?”**

“I asked the engineer about that. Digital clones stress replicating the person’s personality, so the Laws of Respect aren’t applied to them like they are to Amicus. It’s not out of the question that they could threaten someone.”

“Given how much of a workaholic Sozon was, I suppose the data for a lifelike replica is there.” Napolov nodded gravely. **“Chief Totoki, has the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau come across cases of digital clones impersonating people before?”**

“Deepfake technology is used pretty often, but like you said, it’s pretty difficult to hold an actual conversation with it,” Totoki replied from another window, her expression blank to the point of annoyance. **“I think the digital clone angle is convincing in this case.”**

She was in Lyon, where the weather looked much better—her office was awash with rays of sunshine. Her robotic Scottish fold cat, Ganache, turned lazily in its sleep on her desk.

Echika could only envy the carefree life it led.

God, I shouldn’t have let him out of my sight, not even for a second!

Not in her wildest dreams could she have expected that a hint for the copycat

crime would be lying around in Delevo of all places! She thought she'd steered Harold away from the investigation, only to come face-to-face with this mess after Fokine called her over.

"That said, Assistant Inspector." Totoki cleared her throat. "I got a message from Aide Lucraft earlier... Did you have him investigate the vagrant Amicus's body?"

Echika glanced at Harold, but he didn't seem to notice. Why had he reported this to Totoki? Wasn't it clear that she would scold him for it?

"My apologies, Investigator Totoki. I know he's your Amicus now."

"The blame doesn't lie with the assistant inspector. I acted on my own accord," Harold interjected. "I'm sorry, Chief. The crime scene was so reminiscent of the Nightmare of Petersburg that I couldn't stay put."

Totoki narrowed her eyes. The gesture was oddly sympathetic. Come to think of it, she'd been outraged by the copycat crime when she'd told them to contact the city police. If she knew about Harold's past, it would only make sense that she would feel angry. For how cold she came across, Totoki very much cared for her subordinates.

"...You were placed in charge of that case alongside Detective Sozon, if I recall. Did you think to add in your perspective as someone involved with the original incident?"

"Yes. This is a copycat crime, and moreover, they impersonated Sozon using his voice." Harold lowered his eyes in concern. "As his Amicus, I couldn't simply remain a bystander."

"You're part of the Electrocime Investigations Bureau now," Totoki said.

"I am aware of that, of course, which is why I thought I could simply offer information to the city p—"

"Let me finish." Totoki calmly cut him off. "Normally, investigators are advised not to be placed in charge or to get involved in cases they have too much attachment to, such as those involving their relatives. But you're not human. You're an Amicus."

Echika's expression became almost inappropriately dubious. Totoki wasn't scolding Harold—she was identifying with him. Of course, Echika appreciated that her superior cared so much for the people working under her, but the way this was going...

“You are capable of appropriately conducting this investigation based on your Laws of Respect, Aide Lucraft. Unlike humans, the chances of secondary trauma complicating issues for you are slim.”

No.

Totoki's perception of Harold was wrong, but...

Wait.

Echika felt a small chill fill her stomach.

Did Harold anticipate that the chief would sympathize with him the whole time?

Maybe he'd intentionally told her about investigating the crime scene to guide the conversation to a direction where she would allow him to officially join the investigation.

“Assistant Inspector Napolov, we do owe you for transferring the Investigator Aide over to us.” Totoki's words came out sooner than Echika could stop them. **“And you need someone familiar with the Nightmare of Petersburg to look into the copycat crime. Henceforth, we lend Aide Lucraft for your investigation.”**

“Why, that's...” Napolov looked taken aback. **“We're very grateful, but I'm sure you have your hands full as it is.”**

“Yes, that's why we'll dictate the period of his support for you.” Totoki's eyes moved to Echika for the first time. **“Hieda, you should work with Aide Lucraft as well. We can't lend out a bureau Amicus without a supervisor.”**

She couldn't come up with an appropriate response in time.

“Um...,” Echika blurted out, without much thought. **“What about our work with the Special Investigations Unit?”**

“I'll call Investigator Fokine about it. Either way, Aide Lucraft won't be able

to focus on work until the copycat crime is resolved.” *That’s true, but c’mon.*
“Assistant Inspector, I don’t think this is a bad deal for you.”

Napolov gave a few shaky nods, unable to mask his surprise. Echika couldn’t blame him. An electronic investigator and an investigator aide getting involved in a local metropolitan murder case was highly unusual. But since Harold had been in charge of the incident in the past, perhaps this was inevitable.

But even so.

“We couldn’t ask for more, Investigator Totoki.”

“You have my gratitude, too. Thank you, Chief,” Harold said, the very image of earnestness.

Seeing this made Echika want to cover her face. She knew he had to be acting. Of course, Harold would never admit to it. How much of this had he planned? If nothing else, Investigator Fokine had suggested visiting Delevo and scheduled it in before the copycat crime, so that couldn’t have been premeditated.

That meant Harold must have determined the identity of the Sozon imitator after seeing the digital clone. His theory turned out to be right, for better or for worse, which was probably when he decided to appeal to Totoki.

Echika had completely forgotten that this Amicus had a tendency to manipulate situations to his own ends.

The call ended before long, and the holo-browser blinked away. The classical music playing through the lounge gradually reached Echika’s ears again. The timbre of the violin, so bright as to be frivolous, grated on her.

“I’m sorry, Echika. I didn’t think you’d end up getting sucked into this, too,” Harold said.

The nerve of you.

Echika wordlessly got up from the sofa and walked toward a window. She glared down at the dull, gray sea.

Calm down.

She didn’t want him to get hurt by dredging up the past, and just as much, she feared his involvement in this incident would spur his thirst for revenge.

But that was just her ego talking.

“I’m not going to comment on your calculating nature, Aide Lucraft.” She leaned against the glass, its coldness penetrating her skin. “But, it’s just... Are you sure you’re all right?”

Harold rose from the sofa, furrowing his brows like he didn’t understand what Echika was saying. She remembered him making a similar expression during their first meeting, when she’d told him to take better care of himself.

Was it truly beyond Harold to take a sober look at himself?

He could read others and manipulate them like pawns with ease... But at this point, she was honestly starting to think that he wasn’t as perfect as he came across. He’d sympathized with the perpetrator of the E incident, Investigator Liza Robin, that summer. Even during their first case, the sensory crime incident, he’d so opened himself to her plight that he’d partially revealed his secrets to her.

Harold may not have realized it yet, but Echika was starting to wonder if this sympathy of his had been there all along.

“I’m absolutely fine,” Harold answered calmly. “And I wasn’t calculating anything. I honestly just remembered that Sozon’s family had Delevo documents.”

“I see.” Her comment had been about the conversation with Totoki, not what had happened with Delevo. She felt like he was changing the subject. “Anyway, we need to explain this to Investigator Fokine and Bigga when they get back.”

The two were still continuing the investigation into Delevo, but it seemed unlikely they would turn up any hints about TOSTI here. Still, she didn’t have the time to be pessimistic about things now.

“Echika.”

Harold came up beside her, gently placing his hand on her shoulder. This was what he usually did whenever he wanted to put her in a good mood or otherwise manipulate her. She knew that by now.

“...I understand this incident means a great deal to you,” she said.

Harold's grip on her shoulder grew slightly stronger.

"Thank you."

The human mind was fickle and gradually forgot things. That was how people moved on. But an Amicus's memory never faded. The adage about time healing wounds didn't apply to them. How ironic, then, that Harold's unfading pain was keeping him trapped in the past.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 2

Second Showing



Chapter 2

Second Showing

1

The next day, Echika and Harold joined the Saint Petersburg City Police's investigation.

"Aide Lucraft, is Assistant Inspector Napolov on his way to Abayev's residence?"

"Yes. He was called to the police headquarters for questioning, but didn't arrive at the specified time."

The early morning breeze blowing from across the Moyka River felt like it could freeze her cheeks over at any second. Seeking refuge from the cold, Echika and Harold crossed through the doors of the old-styled police headquarters and felt the warmth of the central heating wash over them.

"Didn't they get in touch with Abayev yesterday?"

"Supposedly, but something about the whole thing is fishy," Harold said, undoing his scarf. "Sozon's mother... Elena already came here for questioning."

Like Abayev, Elena was summoned for a simple interview. She'd ordered a digital clone of Sozon from Delevo and even signed a power of attorney approval for Abayev to collect it for her, so the police had to assume she was somehow involved with the copycat crime.

"But you don't actually believe Detective Sozon's family was involved, do you?"

"No, assuming this isn't just wishful thinking on my behalf," Harold said, jerking his chin back. "Still, I understand that the possibility can't be overlooked in this situation."

“Let’s check out her questioning for now.”

Echika and Harold held up their ID cards to the guard Amicus and passed the security gate. Echika walked toward the meeting room, following the Your Forma’s guiding cursor. Harold, meanwhile, strode confidently ahead, since he was already familiar with the building. The sight depressed her. It hadn’t occurred to her how well he knew the place when she came here the other day.

Ultimately, she’d spent all of yesterday irritated. But after forcing herself to sleep, Echika found that her thoughts were a bit clearer today.

In the end, she just needed to solve this case as soon as possible. The sooner they uncovered the truth of this case, the sooner they’d be able to get back to working in the Special Investigations Unit.

Echika repeated this to herself, her eyes fixed on Harold ahead of her.

“Echika.” He turned around. “About Elena’s questioning—”

“Harold!” Someone suddenly called his name as they passed by a lounge.

Echika turned to find a young man walking over to them. He had black messy hair and wore an unfashionable sweater. There was something messy about his overall impression, but it gave him an air of gentleness.

<Nicolai A. Chernov>

Echika blinked in surprise. Chernov. That was Detective Sozon’s last name.

“Nicolai,” Harold said, smiling, smoothly shaking the man’s hand. “You’re here. I’m glad to see you.”

“I brought Mom. I’m not used to dealing with the police, so this is all pretty nerve-racking.”

As Nicolai fidgeted, Echika read his personal data and confirmed her suspicions. This was indeed Detective Sozon’s younger brother.

“This is my partner, Investigator Hieda,” Harold said, introducing her, and Echika shook Nicolai’s hand.

His palm felt a little clammy, implying he was under a lot of stress. The thought that his mother could end up being implicated in the Nightmare

copycat crime must have been tormenting him.

“I just hope Mom is answering the detectives’ questions okay...”

“Yes,” Harold agreed. “I’m concerned about that, too, but I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“What do you mean?” Echika furrowed her brows.

“Well, you see, she has her share of issues.” Nicolai averted his gaze awkwardly. *Issues?* “I just hope she isn’t bothering them too much...”

“Investigator Hieda, yes?”

Echika turned her head and spotted a young male detective approach her from the hall. He had red hair and a small stature, and his expression was contorted in displeasure. Much like Assistant Inspector Napolov, he was a detective from the Robbery-Homicide Division.

It was her first time meeting him, but as inspectors, they could browse each other’s personal data. There was no need for introductions.

“Detective Akim,” Harold called out, already familiar with him. “It’s been too long.”

“I see you’re doing well, Harold,” Akim said, seemingly too stressed for pleasantries. “I realize this is bad manners, given we’ve only just met, Investigator, but could you send a Brain Dive letter of consent template to my terminal?”

“Brain Dive?” Echika repeated the words. “But I thought Ms. Elena’s questioning had only just started.”

“Yes, but she doesn’t seem to remember anything...a side-effect from her medication, apparently.” Akim scratched the back of his neck, looking stumped. “She definitely ordered the digital clone, but we can’t tell how involved she is in this case. Either way, we’re getting nowhere at this rate.”

Brain Dives weren’t conducted on suspects alone. Indeed, during the sensory crime incident, they had Dived into multiple victims in an attempt to track the culprit. But Elena was effectively related to Harold. That being said, they had conducted a Brain Dive into Darya once before, and Harold didn’t seem shaken

by it.

“Maybe we should tell Ms. Elena that Aide Lucraft will be the Belayer?” Echika asked.

“We’ll check.” Detective Akim nodded and turned around. However...

“Wait, please.” Nicolai, who had been listening to their exchange, spoke up. “I need to ask that you don’t tell my mother Harold is going to be the aide this time. It’s best if she doesn’t know.”

“I don’t think we need to go that far...,” Echika said, confused.

“Let’s do as Nicolai asks,” Harold said in an oddly obstinate manner. “I’ll enter the room after Elena is put to sleep with the sedative. Could you call me once everything is ready?”

What’s going on here?

Echika was puzzled, but with Detective Akim rushing her, she didn’t have the time to ask for details. She sent the Brain Dive consent form template over to his terminal and entered the interview room.

As she left, she turned around and saw Harold having a friendly chat with Nicolai. She shrugged—she could prepare for a Brain Dive just fine without his help.

The lights of the interview room were dimmed, and the windows had old-styled blinds pulled down over them. Sitting near a table covered in scratches was an old woman, as thin and emaciated as a wilting tree. She sent a sleepy glance of acknowledgment at Echika.

<Elena Alexavna Tchernova>

Detective Sozon’s mother.

Quickly skimming over her personal data, Echika was overcome by silent surprise. Elena was only sixty-three years of age, but she looked much older than that. Her medical history included multiple mental illnesses, most of them having begun around two and a half years ago. The Nightmare of Petersburg murders had flipped her life upside down.

So that’s what he meant when he said she has “issues.”

“Could you please sign this form?” Detective Akim presented a tablet to Elena. “Your privacy is fully guaranteed. Please entrust yourself to our care.”

“I have nothing to hide,” Elena said as she signed on the screen with her bony hand. “Do Brain Dives hurt?”

“Not at all. There’s no need to worry. You’ll go to sleep, and it’ll be over by the time you wake up,” Echika replied, holding up her ID card. “Hello. I’m Echika Hieda from the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.”

Elena glanced at her ID card but soon lost interest. Her gaunt fingers scratched at the collar of her frayed sweater.

“Either way, I hope this catches that nasty criminal... Do whatever you have to.”

Her whisper made it clear she wasn’t going to stand for her son’s memory being desecrated any longer. Echika had no way of finding out if she was being genuine or if this was just an attempt to deny being involved in the incident.

A few minutes later, one of the police’s Amicus brought in an air mattress. Unlike the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau, the police didn’t have any cots in place for Brain Diving purposes. The air mattress was an ad hoc solution. At Akim’s signal, Elena clumsily lay down on the mattress. Echika prepared the sedative and rolled up Elena’s sleeve. Her skin was thin, and her arm was slender enough that her veins were poking out.

Echika injected the sedative, feeling oddly tense. Elena’s eyes soon fluttered shut, and she fell asleep.

“Are her Mnemosynes really going to have a record of it, though?” Akim asked suspiciously. “This is my first time seeing a Brain Dive, so I don’t really get how it works.”

“It’s one thing if a person’s consciousness was muddled, but the Mnemosynes are supposed to record everything that happens. It should be fine.” Echika took out the Brain Diving cord and connected it to the port in the back of Elena’s head. “You can call Aide Lucraft now.”

Harold entered almost immediately. Upon entering the meeting room, the first thing he did was glance at Elena. Confirming that she was asleep, he

silently approached Echika. He extended the cord as always, and she accepted the Lifeline.

“Did Elena ask about who the Belayer would be?” he asked.

“I don’t think she knows Brain Dives require Belayers to begin with.”

“I see,” he said, looking relieved.

Something about Harold’s attitude toward Elena struck Echika as off, but she wasn’t going to question him about it with Akim watching. Deciding to ask him later, she inserted the Lifeline into her other port. Harold folded back his left ear and plugged the connector in. The usual triangle connection.

“I’m ready when you are,” Harold whispered when he saw her take a deep breath.

She nodded and silently forced the air from her lungs. Right now, she needed to focus on Elena’s Mnemosynes.

She closed her eyes.

“Begin.”

She sank in with a splash. A sea of information without a single bubble surged up, filling her field of vision. Emotions as heavy as molten wax gushed over her limbs, and she fell into those indescribable depths in the blink of an eye.

Suddenly, a vision of a hospital waiting room flashed before her. She caught a glimpse of Nicolai escorting her. The talks about a digital clone had been held a long time ago. Based on the records at Delevo, they had been held a few weeks ago, if not months ago, at the earliest.

Trace back to it. Look away from unrelated Mnemosynes.

Despite her mantra, emotions clinging to Echika like sludge slowly seeped in, eating away at her. It was an inexplicable grayness. Just touching it filled her eyes with a profound coldness, as though a hole had been punctured deep inside her heart. It was the same anxiety one felt when gazing into morning mist

—like your very being was beginning to disintegrate, starting from your fingertips.

Echika took a deep breath, trying to avoid the sensation.

It happened in the tail end of September.

“How have you been holding up, Elena?”

An unfamiliar man’s face came into range. A thin man, age fifty or so. He had darkish skin and a wrinkled shirt—Abayev. She’d seen his profile picture in the case documents.

I found it.

Echika examined the room. The outlines of the place were hazy and obscured, but she could see it was a living room. It had to be Elena’s home. The two were seated on a sofa, speaking unreservedly to each other.

The information she received beforehand had mentioned that Abayev, as representative of the Bereaved Families Association, often visited Elena. His job was to periodically visit families that were unable to move on from the loss of their loved ones.

“The symptoms are relatively light today,” Elena said with a tone that made it seem like she wasn’t feeling better at all. ***“Come to think of it, I went out to the redeveloped sector the other day. Oh, but keep it a secret from Nicolai, would you?”***

“To Cosmos Tower? I wouldn’t expect you to go there.”

“I wouldn’t want to go to that noisy place again anytime soon. Amicus crawling all over the place...”

“They wouldn’t do anything to make you feel worse, would they?”

“I’m not a machine sympathizer like you. Yes, yes... I’m no good with machines, me,” Elena said with an odd hint of guilt. ***“I’ve always thought making a digital clone of my son would be desecrating his memory, but...I’ve started thinking that I can’t keep this up for much longer.”***

Elena revealed that she’d asked Delevo to make a digital clone of Sozon. Abayev widened his eyes in shock, which seemed to spur Elena’s unease even

further. She seemed guilty over tampering with the memory of her son. She'd used her desire to move on as a pretext for attempting to bring Sozon back to life by replicating him. The thought filled her with guilt, and above all else, self-loathing.

Yet Elena had still chosen to go through with it.

"I can't trouble Nicolai any more than I already have." She clenched her fingers at her slender knees. ***"If I could speak to Sozon...maybe something will change."***

"I think this is marvelous progress, Elena," Abayev said happily. ***"I, too, felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders after I spoke to my therapist friend."***

"You mean that school friend of yours that came to the bereaved family meeting last time?"

"Not a friend I'd like to have, mind you, but he is very experienced, so I do trust him. He told me that it doesn't matter how you do it. What matters is struggling to move forward, regardless of what others might say."

Abayev, too, was mourning the passing of his only daughter. His daughter, Zhanna, was the first victim of the murders. She was a university student, a naive girl only twenty years of age. Abayev was a single father, so her death had left him all alone.

"But I still think about it, every single night."

"I can relate." Abayev nodded, his eyes slightly red. He hadn't recovered from his loss, either, although it didn't show on him as much as it did on Elena. ***"Thinking about how she died tears my heart apart every time."***

"Me too."

"If only they would find the culprit... I swear, the police aren't doing anything."

The culprit. The moment she heard that word, Elena's emotions took a dark turn. Echika felt herself being dragged under the current. Pain spread out deep in her heart, as though someone had stabbed a stake through it.

Don't let it overtake you.

Echika tried to let it flow through her, to make her heart as calm and unfazed as possible. But the feelings rushed over her like a surging wave.

“Catching the culprit won’t save Sozon, but it will exonerate him.” “But the police called off the investigation for lack of clues.” “The monster that killed my boy is still out there somewhere, living with their head held high. It’s just unbearable.” “Sozon can’t grow any older anymore.”

A gasp escaped Echika’s lips.

If these two really are involved with the copycat crime, their motive checks out.

Since ordering the clone, Elena had lived every day in regret. Before long, her desire to cancel the order amplified, along with her wish to be swallowed up by the earth. She needed to increase the dosage of her medication, and she spent day after day in a state of sedation.

Her illness always came and went in waves, but this wasn’t so much a worsening in her condition as it was just a state of stagnation. Nevertheless, her Mnemosynes were tinged with pain, as though she were walking through a dark forest.

“Mother.” Nicolai peered down at her. ***“I’m off to work, so make sure to get your sleep.”***

I’m pathetic, she thought. ***My boy is working so hard to go back to normal, but I can’t go anywhere. I’m pathetic. I want to see Sozon. The real Sozon. One more time...***

No. Shut it down. Put some distance between her...

Two weeks had passed since she’d ordered the digital clone. When Abayev came to visit as always, Elena somehow managed to rise from the sheets to greet him. The first thing she did was ask him a question.

“Could you cancel the digital clone order for me?”

Elena wasn’t well enough to go outside on her own right now, but she wasn’t proficient enough with computers to handle the matter online, either. It wasn’t

unusual for people Elena's age to not know how to use the Your Forma properly, but she also kept the order a secret from Nicolai. She was too proud to tell her son everything, so late into the game.

Abayev, for his part, seemed to be quite taken aback by her request.

"But why? The clone is such a good chance for you."

"I thought it over, and it started feeling like a stupid decision."

"Elena, it's just your illness making you feel that way—"

"No, I'm doing this of my own volition. I'm withdrawing the order, and that's final..."

As Elena breathed out those words, she felt like her head was clouded with fog. That was to say, she wouldn't be able to remember this. Like an anchored boat, her thoughts remained bound in place, unable to move anywhere as they were rocked by the cold, harsh waves of sadness.

Elena wished to reach out and touch something she could never have again, just one more time. The dregs of her regret had caught fire, and they would keep burning until they turned to ash. But things didn't always completely burn away. No, the blaze had a way of losing control, until it spread to one's own body and left it a husk of charred bone.

In the end, her fears won out over her hopes.

"Take this," she said, taking out a power of attorney paper printed out by Delevo. ***"It has my signature on it. Could you hand it over to the person in charge and ask them to withdraw the request?"***

Abayev tried to talk her out of it for over twenty minutes, but Elena didn't budge. In the end, he gave up and took the paper.

"Don't let anything bother you, Elena. Get some rest."

"How can I rest when I know my son died in agony?"

"Sozon would have wanted you to take it easy, too."

"Right, they haven't even found the culprit yet..."

At this point, Elena wasn't listening to him. She mumbled incoherently to

herself until Abayev disappeared from her foggy field of vision. But in reality, Abayev didn't submit a withdrawal order next—instead, he took Sozon's digital clone for himself.

Either way, one thing was abundantly clear: Elena had nothing to do with the copycat crime.

Perhaps Abayev had come up with the crime after he'd picked up the power of attorney permit. Given his position and the things he'd said in the Brain Dive, he most certainly had a motive.

After collecting the digital clone, he could have found a pay phone beyond the gaze of security cameras and placed a call to the police by assuming Sozon's identity. He probably thought a call from a deceased detective would be enough to cause a stir in the Robbery-Homicide Division. But when the investigation into the Nightmare of Petersburg didn't resume, Abayev must have lost his temper, spurring him to place a second call and attack a vagrant Amicus...

Echika tried to get more information on him from Elena's Mnemosynes and continued to plunge into the medium layer.

Eventually, she approached late summer.

But then, the Mnemosynes abruptly filled with static and cut off.

Echika suddenly snapped back into reality. She staggered in place and shook her head.

"What is that *thing* doing here?"

Much to her surprise, Echika found *Elena wide awake* on the air mattress. She should have still been under the influence of the sedative, but her eyes were wide open, fixed glaringly at Harold. The Brain Diving cord was dangling in her hands—she'd pulled it out herself.

"What is this?" Her lips trembled. "Explain yourself, Harold!"

Right... Echika finally realized.

Elena took several drugs every day, which probably hampered the efficacy of the sedative. This sort of thing was rare, though not unheard of, but Elena had descended so smoothly into slumber that Echika hadn't considered the possibility.

"Ms. Elena," Detective Akim said, hurriedly trying to soothe her. "There's no need to worry. Please calm down."

"Stop it." Elena's shoulders were rising and falling, like she was having a panic attack. "You were peeking into my Mnemosynes, weren't you? Don't make a fool out of me. I have nothing to show that *thing*!"

She howled scathingly—just what was going on here? Echika looked from Harold to Elena in confusion.

"Elena," Harold said calmly, gently unplugging the Lifeline. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any discomfort—"

"Did Nicolai know about this? He must have hidden it from me! You all tricked me—"

"Harold, go call her son," Detective Akim ordered him swiftly. "Ms. Elena, please take deep breaths. You're hyperventilating..."

Before Echika could say anything, Harold obeyed and turned on his heels. He left the meeting room without looking back. Elena sank limply into bed only after confirming he had gone. Her hair was clinging to her forehead, which was now dripping with sweat.

"What is that thing doing here?"

Echika could feel the cold facts stringing together in the back of her head. If she recalled correctly, Sozon had been murdered before Harold's eyes. Elena must have been informed of what had happened to him, since he was her son.

Did that explain why Harold had refused to appear before her, then?

A short while later, Nicolai hurried into the room. He knelt at his mother's side and had her take her pills for the day. Elena closed her eyes. Even with her son holding her hand, she looked to be half-asleep. As he listened to Akim's

explanation, he gently rubbed his mother's arm in practiced motions.

Echika finally remembered to inhale. She hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath the whole time.

"I'm sorry for any trouble we caused, Detective," Nicolai apologized.

"No, we're sorry for not taking her condition into account," Akim said apologetically, before he glanced at Echika, as though remembering she was also there. "Right...Investigator Hieda. What were the results of the Brain Dive?"

I completely forgot.

"Ms. Elena isn't a suspect. She wanted to have the order for the virtual clone withdrawn," Echika said, relating what she'd seen in the Mnemosynes and glancing at the door. There was no sign of Harold coming back. "She entrusted Abayev with the power of attorney permit, but it's possible he used it to personally accept the digital clone without telling her. This doesn't prove he's involved with the copycat crime, of course, but..."

"But it does give us enough ground to issue a search warrant for his house. I'll get Assistant Inspector Napolov on it right away."

Akim bolted out of the meeting room. As his footsteps grew distant, a thundering silence settled in their wake. Somewhere in the distance, a door slammed shut.

From Elena's side, Nicolai looked down at his mother with concern. There was so much Echika wanted to ask, but this probably wasn't something she should intrude on.

"...I'm really sorry. I realize she must have startled you, but this is normal for her." Nicolai finally raised his head and gave Echika a forced smile.

He was still patting his mother's arm like he was looking for a distraction.

Echika swallowed anxiously. "This is 'normal'?"

"Yes, she throws a fit whenever Harold gets involved...", Nicolai said with an awkward smile. "She just doesn't really understand Amicus, you see. She still thinks Harold could have saved my brother from the killer. But how do I put it...?" He paused, then added, "I feel bad for him, but he's different from us, so

he'll be fine."

When you were on the verge of drowning in despair, the ability to pin all the blame on a machine felt like salvation. Even if you knew it was misguided, sometimes there was no stopping the impulse. Echika could relate, since she'd once done the same.

We get so arrogant, yet so brittle, when our hearts have nothing to cling to.

"I'm grateful to him, though." Nicolai's lips softened in a feigned smile. "If nothing else, he got to see my brother's last moments..."

He clutched Elena's sleeves, wrinkling them. Echika, too, felt as though she would be crushed under the weight of his guilt.

"...I'll send someone over when Elena wakes up," Echika said, and she fled the meeting room.

For some reason, the corridor was strangely frigid. Hugging herself, Echika pushed through it with rapid steps.

What had transpired in Harold's life after he lost Sozon? How did everyone else feel following his death?

Have I ever considered any of those things?

She thought she had, but the truth was that she didn't have a clue. How should she speak to Harold about this? Unable to come up with an answer, she headed to the lounge, where Harold was standing by the window. He'd just wrapped up a phone call; he closed the holo-browser window and looked up.

"Good timing, Echika." He walked over to her briskly, his expression placid, as usual. "Assistant Inspector Napolov just called. The security drones around Moscow Victory Park spotted someone matching Abayev's height and physique. They'll investigate his house as soon as the search warrant is issued."

"Got it," Echika said, struggling to shift gears. "Any leads on where Abayev himself is?"

"He's still unreachable. Either way, let's link up with the search party at his apartment."

With that, Harold headed out of the lounge, looking completely unshaken by

what had just transpired. Echika clenched her fist, overcome with emotion that she couldn't express.

"I feel bad for him, but he's different from us, so he'll be fine."

Yes, it did seem like none of this was bothering him. But...



Abayev's apartment was about an hour away from the police headquarters. The five-story brick apartment building was located in a developed area on the outskirts of the city. It looked relatively old.

By the time Harold and Echika showed up in the Lada Niva, the parking lot was already packed with patrol cars. The iron door to the building was wide open, and the city police's security Amicus were standing guard.

No officers, not even Assistant Inspector Napolov, were in sight. Something was off.

"Does this mean they got the warrant already?" Echika removed her seatbelt. "But there's no one around here..."

"I haven't gotten any calls about that, but maybe they have." Harold glanced at his terminal, then opened the driver's seat door. "Let's link up with them. Abayev's apartment is on the third floor."

The pair hurried out of the Niva and entered the building after getting approval from the security Amicus. Silence hung over the mailboxes, and the elevator was stopped at the top floor.

As they ascended the stairs, police officers rushed down past them. They continued their descent without so much as glancing at Harold and Echika.

"Someone's in a hurry," Harold whispered.

"...Yeah."

They got to the third floor and found Assistant Inspector Napolov in front of Abayev's apartment unit. He was dressed in a thick coat, and his usually gentle eyes were dark with melancholy. The front door was wide open, and police officers were rushing in and out.

Harold and Echika exchanged a glance. Something was *definitely* off.

“Hello, Assistant Inspector.” Harold took the first step and approached Napolov. “I’m sorry we’re late.”

“No worries.” Napolov breathed out through his nose. “I’m sorry we didn’t contact you.”

“What about Abayev?”

“Well... You see, he basically shut himself inside his home,” Napolov said evasively. “I was going to ask you to help check it out, but it’ll have to wait. There’s something else we need to investigate first.”

“What do you mean?” Harold raised an eyebrow.

One of the officers left the apartment. His face was deathly pale, and he averted his gaze when Echika tried to look him in the eye. What happened?

“Come inside,” Napolov said like he was stifling an emotion. “But don’t disturb the scene. Forensics haven’t gotten here yet.”

...Forensics?

Echika flinched, but Harold hurried into the room, as though those words had propelled him forward. She followed. They stepped into the dim entrance hall, where a large travel bag lay abandoned. Abayev must have been planning on going somewhere—or fleeing, rather. The short corridor was littered with a large number of empty vodka bottles. They pressed deeper into the apartment, past the living room door at the end of the hall, which was wide open. Echika couldn’t help but feel like something inexplicable was about to creep up on her.

The moment they entered the living room, her breath caught in her throat. Every hair on her body stood on end.

What...is this...?

Abayev was on the sofa...or rather, he’d been placed on the sofa. His arms and legs were scattered around like spare parts, and his naked exposed torso was lying there. Sitting atop his red, solid stomach was his head. The same eyes Echika had seen just an hour ago inside Elena’s Mnemosynes were now gazing blankly at her, one of them closed. Strands of blood were flowing down his

forehead like tears, dripping into his half-parted lips.

It was a much more brutal sight than the vagrant Amicus's remains in Moscow Victory Park.

The victims were dismembered and decapitated while they were still alive, before their heads were placed on their torsos.

Feeling nausea shoot up from the pit of her stomach, Echika covered her mouth. She craned her head, looking away, but her eyes settled on a tablet lying on the floor. Or more importantly, something emblazoned over the flooring so conspicuously that it covered the tablet.

A series of red letters.

GENUINE

"It's written in blood." Harold narrowed his eyes in disgust. "The killer used Abayev's blood to write this."

"Why...?" Echika felt like her knees were on the verge of buckling. "Why was he murdered?"

Harold said nothing. His face was frighteningly expressionless. He walked around the sofa, avoiding the bloodstains, to peer at the back of Abayev's head.

Is...is he even blinking?

"There's a laceration on the back of his head. His Your Forma was extracted."

Echika's mind went blank. She stood there, frozen in place, only able to watch the Amicus as he coldly ran off the facts.

"This is the same modus operandi as the Nightmare of Petersburg killer."

2

The Saint Petersburg police forensics squad arrived nearly an hour later. The officers entered the living room and split up to record the state of Abayev's

body and the crime scene. They also deployed mill robots, the antennae of their ant-like silicone bodies wavering as they scuttered about.

Echika watched it all happen, her back against the wall. Her head had been throbbing from the stench of blood this whole time.

“Abayev was contacted yesterday, but he didn’t show up at the police station at the agreed-upon time today, right?” Harold asked, standing beside her. “Is there a chance he was killed as early as this morning?”

“This is just a tentative appraisal, but...,” replied Szubin, examining Abayev’s corpse. “Based on the corpse’s temperature and how muddled his corneas are, the estimated time of death is two in the afternoon.”

It was the same gloomy forensics officer who had showed up yesterday on the scene of the vagrant Amicus’s murder. He was completely unfazed, even in the face of this grisly crime scene. Maybe the job had numbed him to the sight of corpses, or maybe Harold was right, and he just never showed any emotions...

Echika herself had seen Mnemosynes of similar crime scenes before, but the sight still weighed on her heart.

“The reports describing the earlier killing as a copycat crime might have wounded the culprit’s pride.” Harold’s tone was oddly calm. “Abayev’s murder is clearly some sort of retribution.”

Echika pressed down on her temples. What she wouldn’t give for a cigarette now. “The police suspected Abayev of being the copycat killer, but they didn’t have any definitive proof. Besides, none of the details leaked to the press...”

“No, we have proof. We checked for Abayev’s fingerprints, too.”

Echika looked at the source of the voice and saw Assistant Inspector Napolov step into the living room. He had gloves on and was holding a travel bag—the same one they’d seen lying at the entrance. He placed it on the floor, revealing its contents. An electric saw splattered with circulatory fluid, along with sneakers and a windbreaker... They were clearly the tools he’d used to kill the vagrant Amicus.

Yes, that’ll do for proof...

A bereaved parent should have felt a great deal of resistance at the thought of mimicking the Nightmare incident, but it seemed Abayev had been able to overcome it. That was how badly he wanted the investigation reopened.

The expression that had been on his face during the Brain Dive surfaced in Echika's mind.

"I swear, the police aren't doing anything."

She'd heard the lamentation leave his lips, but at this point, there was no way of telling how he really felt.

"The issue is," Napolov said, wiping his hands. "Like you said, Investigator Hieda, the public should have no way of knowing we were going after Abayev. His killer shouldn't have known we suspected Abayev was the culprit of the copycat crime."

"Isn't the fact Abayev allowed the killer into his house the answer?" Harold looked around the room. "There are no signs the windows or door were broken into, which means his murderer walked in through the front door... If we assume Abayev knew the killer, that should answer all our questions."

Echika swallowed nervously. He was right; if the culprit of the Nightmare murders was someone Abayev knew, it all made sense. The apartment building had an anachronistic design to begin with, so it wouldn't be possible to enter through the front door without a magnet key. When visitors came in from the outside, they had to call via an intercom so someone would undo the lock from the inside.

"In which case," Napolov said, "the culprit somehow found out Abayev was the copycat killer and came to attack him in a frenzy?"

"I think that's the most natural conclusion, given what we know. What's more, Abayev is a relative of the first of the Nightmare murder victims. It was believed that the only common thread connecting the murder victims was that they were Amicus sympathizers, but it's possible the culprit went after the daughter of someone he knew, first."

"Even so," Echika said, trying to keep her thoughts rational. "The Nightmare murderer never left any evidence until now. That was why the police called off

the investigation... Wouldn't he think that attacking Abayev might expose the fact they were acquainted?"

"Maybe he did consider that, but couldn't reel in his anger anyway. Based on his profile, the killer has a great deal of pride."

Indeed, they'd discussed the perpetrator's profile back in the park.

"I was never informed of it," Echika said.

"Oh, pardon. Sozon came up with it."

According to Harold, Sozon's profile was as follows: a Russian man, aged thirty to forty. Had familial problems during his childhood and experienced parental abuse. Had a highly cautious personality. Was highly intelligent and prideful but had few relationships in his personal life. Given the state of the bodies, it was almost certain he was familiar with human anatomy. Likely worked as some kind of health care provider and had a tendency to daydream. His violent nature manifested in childhood after being triggered by some manner of intense stress.

Echika had heard that Sozon had nurtured Harold's discerning eye, but his profiling really was quite detailed.

"And with all that information, you still couldn't narrow it down to a suspect?"

"Profiling is only conjecture. Without any hints from the crime scene, it's good for nothing." Harold shook his head. "But this killing is more emotion-driven than the ones before. If nothing else, the message written in the victim's blood is new."

Harold looked down to the floor, and Echika did the same—those letters were written with blood. Staring at them made her feel terrible.

Then Forensics Officer Szubin examined the tablet lying on the floor that was splattered with blood.

"The digital clone data is in here... This should serve as secondary evidence to prove Abayev was the copycat killer." Szubin once again looked down at the bloody message on the floor. "'Genuine'... That's the anonym for 'counterfeit.'"

Like...when you want to say that a painting or some other artwork are the real article.”

“You’re surprisingly knowledgeable about this, Szubin,” Napolov said, impressed.

“No... Everyone knows that...,” Szubin said, not smiling. “They wrote with their non-dominant hand to obfuscate their handwriting... And they didn’t use their fingers, they used a brush. A pretty big flat brush, the kind painters use.”

Echika checked Szubin’s personal data again.

<Volunteer staff at Hermitage Museum>

Back in his student days, he’d taken painting lessons. Maybe he’d get along with Bigga.

“Sozon did mention the killer had a ‘unique aesthetic sense.’” Harold brought a hand to his chin pensively. “So if the killer used a personal brush for his crimes, it’s likely he’s involved with the arts, or at least interested in it. That could make for a new clue.”

“I hope so.” Napolov glanced at Szubin. “Any other evidence on the scene?”

“...What?” Szubin asked, looking dazed. “Ah, no, analysis is still ongoing. And, um... Assistant Inspector Napolov, there’s something I want you to see...”

Szubin went into another room with him. Echika thought it best to leave the crime scene to them for the time being. She couldn’t stand to stay there for much longer.

“Sorry, I need to step out.”

Echika moved past Harold and left the living room, passing officers in the narrow corridor and heading out the front door. The staircase’s common landing was full of the central heating’s thick steam, which only aggravated her headache, so she went down the stairs.

The image of Abayev’s body was burned into her eyelids.

She crossed the building’s entrance and walked outside, where a gust of clear wind brushed against her cheeks. The entrance had holo-tape stretched over it, which forbid civilians from entering. A few civilians argued with security Amicus.

Echika walked past them and into the parking lot. She looked up at the dull clouds drifting in the sky.

She didn't want to accept it. She didn't want to accept that this crime was committed by the culprit of the Nightmare of Petersburg.

This should have all ended with the copycat killer being caught. All suspicion was fixed on Abayev, the investigation seemed to be reaching its climax—and now this. Why did it end up like this?

Echika didn't know, and she honestly didn't want to know.

Before she knew it, her hand was in her pocket, and she took out her electronic cigarette. Ever since she stopped using the medical cartridges, she carried it around as a charm of sorts. She switched it on and placed it between her lips without a second thought. The faint aroma of mint settled into her lungs. It felt like it managed to ever so slightly quell the nausea that had been brewing inside her.

"Echika."

She turned around to find that Harold had followed her. He looked at her with the cigarette in her mouth, but didn't seem surprised. He approached her and patted her on the back, prompting her to face the Niva.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were feeling so bad."

"It's all right," she said, feigning composure. "I'm fine. I just needed some fresh air."

For whatever reason, the sight of their familiar maroon car filled her with relief. Echika and Harold both entered the Niva, gazing at the blue glow of the siren lights. More police cars were driving in.

This really was the worst possible scenario.

At first, she thought that getting Harold involved in the copycat crime would just rub salt in his wounds and ignite his urge for revenge. But now, the actual culprit had made an appearance.

"Just how arrogant is this killer?" Echika had to stop herself from outright cussing. "He could have just ignored a copycat. He didn't have to go this far..."

“Yes. We should have considered the possibility the incident could end up provoking the original killer.”

Harold’s expression was like the surface of a frozen lake in midwinter—its currents halted, his face bereft of emotions as he dispassionately accepted the facts. There had been a time when Echika wouldn’t have been able to guess at what he was thinking in this state.

But not anymore.

Abayev was the copycat killer, but he was also related to the first victim of the Nightmare murders. It was clear Harold was in a very complex state of mind over this.

“Hmm,” Echika gently switched off the cigarette. “If the culprit of the Nightmare of Petersburg murders really is behind this—”

“There’s no ‘if.’ It’s him, that’s undeniable,” Harold quietly interjected. “I wouldn’t mistake him for someone else.”

Echika clenched her teeth. *Aah, it’s just like I thought.* He wasn’t letting it show on his face, but Harold was backed into a corner, his composure shattered.

“...Aide Lucraft. If Abayev really was killed by the culprit of the Nightmare murders, then you ought to be removed from the investigation,” Echika said as firmly as she could.

Harold looked at her, his gaze meeting hers. Those frozen eyes of his were full of confusion.

“Is that a joke?”

“Would I be telling jokes right now?”

She’d wanted to tell him that ever since he’d been given permission to cooperate with the investigation the day before.

“I’m serious,” Echika asserted, trying to keep her jaw from trembling. “I don’t think you should be involved in this anymore.”

“Why?” Harold was clearly confused. “I don’t follow.”

“I could ask Chief Totoki or Assistant Inspector Napolov to have your request for aid retracted.”

“They wouldn’t accept it. Now that it’s come to this, they need me all the more.”

Harold had an intimate connection to the Nightmare incident, so he shouldn’t have been involved with the investigation. But Totoki had put him on it anyway, since he was an Amicus and had been in charge of the previous inquiry with Detective Sozon. She couldn’t imagine that he would be removed from the investigation.

Echika knew that. Yet she still wanted to say something, anything that would have a chance of getting him away from this case. The image of Abayev’s corpse still weighed on her heart. The Nightmare killer had visited his apartment last night, breathed the same air they had. The events of these last few hours were bound to trigger Harold’s thirst for vengeance.

“...Who’s to say?” she asked, her tone turning stubborn. “This investigation could proceed just fine without you.”

“On what basis are you saying that? If you mean a Brain Dive could solve it, then you’ll need me to do it.”

“Either way, I don’t want you to get involved. Even if Assistant Inspector Napolov does—”

“Echika.”

He called her name in admonishment, and Echika fell silent. Harold looked at her imploringly and parted his handsome lips.

“You know how long I’ve been waiting for this.”

A lump formed in the back of her throat. Yes, she knew how long he’d been waiting for this. And oh, how she wished she didn’t! This was why she wanted him off of the case.

“Some clues might turn up once the mill robots are done combing over the apartment.” He was staring at Echika, but it felt like he was actually looking elsewhere, at the unidentified culprit. “The murder was driven by emotion this

time around. We might find a lead if the killer did anything out of the ordinary. In fact, we've already fleshed out his profile by learning that he was acquainted with Abayev and is interested in art."

This was true. The culprit had pulled off perfect crimes thus far, but he could have very well slipped up this time. The leads they'd gained were promising, and it would be wonderful if they led to the killer's arrest.

Yet the question remained—what would Harold do once the killer was identified?

"...This is all wishful thinking," Echika groaned. "It's possible they'll find something and it'll only make things worse. Like, for example—"

"If I could be traumatized, it would have happened by now."

"Or maybe you are, and you're just not aware of it."

"I'm fine, really."

"What makes you say that for sure?"

"Because this is *me* we're talking about. I know myself better than anyone."

"No, you don't."

"Why are you being so stubborn?"

"I am not being stubborn!" Echika finally raised her voice in frustration.

Harold sighed. Though his expression was as calm as ever, he was running his hands through his hair in irritation. Eerily, he seemed far closer to a young man at the moment than a machine. Then he heaved another false breath.

"Echika, are you so concerned because of that thing I told you once?"

Her heart constricted for a moment. She struggled to find a response.

"...What...are you talking about?"

"Back when we first met, I told you about my anger at the killer."

"If I ever catch Sozon's killer, I intend to judge him by my own hand."

"But the Laws of Respect apply to you. You can't hurt a human."

"Are you sure about that?"

“At the time, you were afraid that I would modify my own programming to punish them.”

Echika had thought that, but now she knew better. Harold didn’t need to modify his programming. He was perfectly capable of that to begin with.

“Rest assured, that was just a figure of speech. I might be a next-generation all-purpose AI, but I can’t harm human beings. Amicus that don’t abide by the Laws of Respect don’t pass the IAEC’s review,” Harold lied to her calmly.

“I only said that to express how deeply I regret failing to save Sozon and how upset I am. The thing is...it’s frowned upon for Amicus to direct anger toward human beings, so I asked you to keep it a secret.”

It seemed Harold hadn’t yet realized Echika knew everything—and she didn’t want that day to come, either. But the fact that he was lying to her so easily filled her with inexplicable sadness.

Why?

Even she couldn’t make sense of the feeling.

“You can’t hurt human beings... I’m well aware, you don’t have to say it.” Her electronic cigarette nearly slipped from her fingers, so she clutched it tightly enough to nearly snap it. “I’m just...I’m just concerned that this would hurt your feelings, somehow.”

“Yes, it would. I would be very hurt if I was taken off the case.”

She hadn’t wanted Harold to carry any burdens, and so she’d kept his secret to herself. To protect Harold from the IAEC.

But would she be able to steer him away from his quest for vengeance? She didn’t have the right to stop him, of course. She’d told herself that countless times and was repeating it in her mind even now.

But...if Harold found the person who killed someone dear to him and dispatched them in the same manner they did...then what would become of him?

Realistically speaking, he would likely be deactivated and put to sleep in a pod, like his brother, Steve. At worst, he would be dismantled altogether. But

that wasn't the issue.

How would murdering someone change Harold's heart?

Echika didn't know how an Amicus would process that. What if it fundamentally warped who he was?

"No," Echika said desperately. "I...I can't endorse this."

It felt like she was slowly sinking into the ground. The soles of her boots were moist, as though they were dissolving into the asphalt and pulling her ankles down. The electronic cigarette creaked in her grasp.

Silence hung in the air.

"I see." Harold's expression suddenly turned very curt. "By the way...I thought you'd quit smoking?"

Echika kept her mouth shut for a moment.

"..." She was trying to abstain from it, of course, and she hadn't lit up in a while. "That has nothing to do with this."

Harold didn't respond. Echika felt tears welling at the corner of her eyes. Maybe she would have been able to steer Harold away from this investigation without coming across as unsympathetic if she could handle herself better. But she simply didn't have that kind of tact. Being delicate was beyond her. All she could do was keep on saying "no," like a child throwing a tantrum.

What could she do? All she wanted was to keep Harold unharmed. She didn't want anyone to get hurt.

"So this is where you two were."

Unable to keep up, Echika turned to find that Assistant Instructor Napolov had left the apartment building. He was striding toward them and tilting his head, trying to stave off the cold.

"Szubin says it'll take a while." He glanced at the building. "I'm going back to the police department, so I don't think we'll need you for the rest of the day. You can head on home."

"I'll stay here," Harold said at once. "And Assistant Inspector, I need to make a

request.”

Echika looked up at him, and the Amicus snuck a glance at her. Her breath caught in her throat.

“I think seeing the crime scene placed Investigator Hieda in a state of shock. If you don’t mind, I’d like for *her to be removed from the investigation for the time being.*”

Echika couldn’t so much as utter a word anymore.

*

“I admit, I’m surprised. Never thought an Amicus would be arguing with a human.”

Through the side mirror, Echika could see Abayev’s apartment building grow distant. The police car’s seats were much less comfortable than the Lada Niva’s. Leaning against the passenger seat, Echika looked at Napolov. He wore an exasperated expression.



“I’m sorry,” she apologized, trying to sound as calm as possible. “It’s just...a difference of opinion.”

“I did hear next-generation Amicus have a very advanced emotional engine, but I can’t believe he’s that sensitive.” Napolov intentionally maintained a light tone of voice. “Well, I’m guessing he’s checking the crime scene to his heart’s content right about now.”

“Yes, but...still, I’m sorry to have caused this mess.”

She dug her nails into her forearm unconsciously. After their argument, Echika had parted ways with Harold in the parking lot of the apartment building. Napolov caught onto the situation upon seeing the shock in Echika’s eyes when Harold suggested she be removed from the investigation. He’d offered her a ride home in the end.

“Don’t worry about it. Your place is on the way back to the police department.” Napolov’s composure was making Echika feel even guiltier. “Don’t worry, Harold will cheer back up by tomorrow. You get over most things by sleeping on them.”

“...I just hope that applies to Amicus, too.”

Echika didn’t know why they’d had a falling-out. Just remembering Harold’s cold expression made her choke up. She’d butted heads with him plenty of times before, but this was the first time he’d flat out rejected her. She wished she could just take it all in stride and double down—yet she couldn’t help but wonder how she would face him tomorrow. What she wouldn’t have given to forget what happened a few minutes ago!

Was she sticking her nose where it didn’t belong? Maybe, but with how things were, how could she not meddle?

“Anyway, Investigator Hieda, just show up to the police department tomorrow with your head held high like nothing happened, you hear?”

“Understood.” Echika ruffled up her bangs. “Um, Assistant Inspector, I have a...personal concern with regard to Aide Lucraft. I’m worried being involved in this investigation will put more strain on him than he can handle.”

“I understand how you feel.” Napolov nodded sympathetically. “Of course, I don’t plan to have Harold do anything reckless, either. I’ll have him removed the moment something starts to look off about him.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s just...this case is a godsend, for both me and him.”

Napolov tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Echika realized that a lot more was riding on this case for the police than just another opportunity to investigate the Nightmare of Petersburg.

“We had to cope with losing Sozon, too,” he said softly, like he was gently stating the facts. “This case isn’t just important for Harold. It’s also a big deal to me. He was one of my closest subordinates.”

Echika bit her bottom lip. She was so worried for Harold that she’d neglected to consider Napolov’s feelings, but he was right. Napolov had been the chief of the Robbery-Homicide Division during the Nightmare incident and had supervised Sozon’s investigation. Under his watch, Sozon was abducted and murdered, and the case went unsolved.

“No one expected the killer to go after Sozon.” Napolov furrowed his brows. “All the victims up to that point were Amicus sympathizers, but Sozon was a machine denier.”

Doubt crept across Echika’s face. A machine denier?

“But Aide Lucraft is an Amicus...”

“I don’t know the details, but Harold was special somehow. Sozon didn’t want to even have an Amicus at home. His wife was an Amicus sympathizer, though.”

“One day, he picked him up and brought him home. We didn’t have an Amicus, so things just clicked.”

Darya had told her that once. That explained why they didn’t have an Amicus at the time.

“The killer probably recognized that Sozon was working with Harold...was working with an Amicus. He didn’t investigate any deeper into him, assumed he was an Amicus sympathizer, and decided to kill him.”

“Did the killer...?” Echika thought back to her talk with Darya. “Did they do it to threaten the city police through Aide Lucraft?”

Darya had told her as much—Sozon had been abducted and brutalized, but Harold was likewise held captive and returned safely, the culprit deliberately exploiting his memory to show off the gruesome crime scene. To warn that this was what would become of anyone who went after them.

“Or maybe they just wanted to finish their murders off with a bang. The murders did suddenly stop after that,” Napolov said, his expression clouding over. “I regret it a great deal. If we’d have believed Harold’s reasoning at the time, maybe we wouldn’t have lost Sozon...”

Harold had been the first to track Sozon’s whereabouts after he went missing. But Napolov and the Robbery-Homicide Division dismissed his reasoning because he was an Amicus.

“We were convinced it was someone else back then. We even had evidence to support it. But now that I reflect on it, the killer was probably leading us by the nose.” Napolov pinched the bridge of his own nose. “...I’m sorry. Anyway, we can’t let this chance slip away.”

“Yes.” Echika leaned forward heavily. “I understand.”

“I realize why you’re concerned, of course. But please try to see where Harold is coming from, too.”

Echika could only silently ball up her hands. This was her selfish ego at work. But when had she lost control of it?

3

Even Harold had to admit that he’d resorted to underhanded means to drive Echika away.

Abayev’s corpse was carried away from the crime scene long after sunset. Harold and Szubin watched as the body bag was loaded into a van in the parking lot. The revolving warning lights of the patrol cars remained active even as night settled in, flashing silently in the gloom.

“I checked the results of the mill robots’ analysis, but...they didn’t find

anything this time, either,” Szubin muttered, as though he were speaking to himself. “The killing was definitely the result of an emotional outburst...but there’s no way it was a crime of passion. If it was, we would turn up some fingerprints or clothing fibers, and the security cameras in the hallway would have picked up the perpetrator.”

“What about the paintbrush?”

“No leads there, either... Even if we figured out the brush’s stock index number, we wouldn’t be able to identify the killer through their purchase history. Assuming it isn’t one-of-a-kind.”

Harold let out an artificial breath. In a sense, the absence of clues on the scene lined up with the previous Nightmare murders. But it was too soon to discard the possibility of the killer being an acquaintance of Abayev’s.

But why had they penned that bloody message with a paintbrush? A finger would have more than sufficed. They’d been wearing gloves, so they wouldn’t have left fingerprints regardless. And it was hard to believe that he wanted to advertise his aesthetic inclinations by using a brush.

Or perhaps that was his objective? Perhaps the humiliation the killer felt over the copycat crime had spurred him to subtly emphasize his identity?

But in any case...

“Regardless, we need to find the killer before they strike again.”

“Again?” Szubin asked. “Why...? What makes you assume there’s going to be another murder?”

“It’s just a possibility. Maybe the killer showed themselves this time as a form of retribution, but reawakened to the thrill of murder and lost their desire to keep quiet in the process.”

Two and a half years ago, the perpetrator’s killing spree came to an end with Sozon. Why, exactly, they had stopped was unclear. But now that they had shown themselves once again, Harold thought it unlikely they would be satisfied with mere retribution. The success of their plan would bolster their confidence and inspire them to seek out their next victim.

“We should warn the other victims’ families for the time being. Abayev was targeted, so any one of them could be next. We should dispatch officers to all of their residences.”

“...I’ll let Assistant Inspector Napolov know. I have other business with him as it is.”

Harold paused in realization and asked. “Is he still handling your ‘therapy’?”

“Hmm?” Szubin turned his eyes to Harold, as quiet and unreadable as ever. “He gave me a lot of guidance when I was in the Robbery-Homicide Division. But...now things are fine.”

Sozon had described Szubin as “a textbook example of inexpressiveness.” People like him, who showed little emotion and were lacking in nonverbal cues, were quite rare, but not unheard of.

“I’m sorry,” Harold apologized. He might not have been able to read Szubin’s emotions, but he did feel like he’d said something insensitive. Perhaps he really wasn’t as composed as he’d assumed. “But thanks to you, we did find out the killer might have an interest in art. I’m grateful that there’s been a new discovery.”

“...The mill robots would have picked up on it even if I hadn’t said anything,” Szubin replied curtly, and walked away.

Harold called out for him to stop, and Szubin turned around, shooting him a detached look. Harold extended his hand to him.

“Would you mind lending the brush to me? I might discover some kind of clue.”

Szubin gave him the tablet he was carrying under his arm. The device, which had been found beneath the bloody message, used to belong to Abayev, and it was now in an evidence bag.

“Just don’t take it out of the bag. I’ll...be back to pick it up in a bit,” Szubin warned him, and walked off.

As soon as Harold saw Szubin walk away, he unflinchingly opened the evidence bag. He couldn’t leave fingerprints anyway. Then he took it out and

switched it on. If Abayev had been acquainted with the killer, they would have kept in touch via Your Forma, but the terminal in his tablet may have contained some kind of record of the exchange. Harold was willing to gamble on that chance.

The light emanating from the screen parted the darkness.

“No. I...I can’t endorse this.”

Echika’s tormented expression replayed in his mind. Even Harold had to admit that he’d treated her terribly. That was no way to treat a friend. Honestly, his emotional engine *was* off-balance. Of course, he didn’t expect Echika to actually be taken off the case. Napolov would write the situation off as a disagreement—which wasn’t far from the truth. Plus, they would need Echika’s ability to Brain Dive to pursue the killer eventually.

But Harold did want her to be kept at an arm’s length from the investigation, to keep her from getting in his way. He’d been waiting for this moment since the day of Sozon’s murder. The moment when the investigation would restart, and he could pursue the killer again. He wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. He would find the killer at all costs.

But there was something that puzzled him. Why was Echika acting that stubborn? Her worry seemed genuine, but she was overreacting.

One of his old suspicions reared its head again. What if she wasn’t simply overprotective, but actually knew his secret—knew about the neuromimetic system? What if she was so opposed to him being put on the investigation because she feared he really would punish the killer himself?

But if that was the case, Echika would have no reason not to expose Harold. After all, his system was in violation of International AI Operations Law, just like TOSTI’s. Overlooking this was a crime in and of itself. There was no way an investigator would actively commit a crime just to ensure that her aide could keep working with her.

But now that he thought of it, Echika had hidden the truth of her “sister,” Matoi, despite knowing it was illegal... But then again...

This isn’t going anywhere. He could ruminate endlessly over anything

involving Echika, so long that he would pressure his processing. That was to say that thinking about her weighed on him. And right now, he needed to focus on the killer.

He was losing his composure. Gripped by frustration, Harold stared at the screen monitor. It had finished booting up, and a human face had appeared in it.

For a moment, he felt his circuits run cold.

Szubin had told him that the digital clone's data was stored here. Harold hadn't forgotten that, of course, but...he hadn't been expecting to come face-to-face with it the moment he turned the tablet on.

Sozon stared back at him from the screen.

His neat black hair and masculine features, his leaden eyes that could see through all, every aspect of the replica captured Sozon's real-life appearance. The only difference was that his shirt was buttoned up—but the model was blinking, and probably breathing, too. It was difficult for Harold's optical device to tell, but he thought he could see him move faintly with each breath.

This faint "trembling" was typical of a living human body, and including it was an important factor in overcoming the uncanny valley. This was why Amicus breathed, but he hadn't expected digital clones to replicate this, too.

Maybe that explained it. Why Harold called out to him, unable to tear his eyes from the screen.

"Sozon."

The digital clone looked at him.

"Hey. It's nice to meet you."

It felt like someone had just splashed cold water on him.

Digital clones were made based on data supplied by the client. But despite Harold working alongside Sozon, their relationship only had a minuscule

footprint online. On top of that, most of the data gathered from Elena's home centered on Sozon during his student days.

So naturally enough, the clone didn't have any of Sozon's memories of him.

The gravity of Harold's reaction a moment ago now seemed absurd to him. Ultimately, the clone was just another AI like himself. He knew this. This wasn't real. It was, at worst, a misguided attempt to provide comfort.

So why had he spoken to it? It couldn't be... Had he borrowed the tablet from Szubin because he unconsciously longed to speak to Sozon again?

Once again, Harold found himself disgusted at the terribly human impulse produced by the neuromimetic system. Sozon was dead. Harold had failed to save him. What would he even have said when he saw his deceased partner's face, fake though it was? What had he intended to say?

Had he been primed to beg Sozon for forgiveness?

Even though I've never once thought about being forgiven?

Harold unconsciously grabbed the scarf tied around his neck. His thought processes were getting mixed up. Out from the discord emerged Echika's voice.

"I'm just...I'm just concerned that this would hurt your feelings somehow."

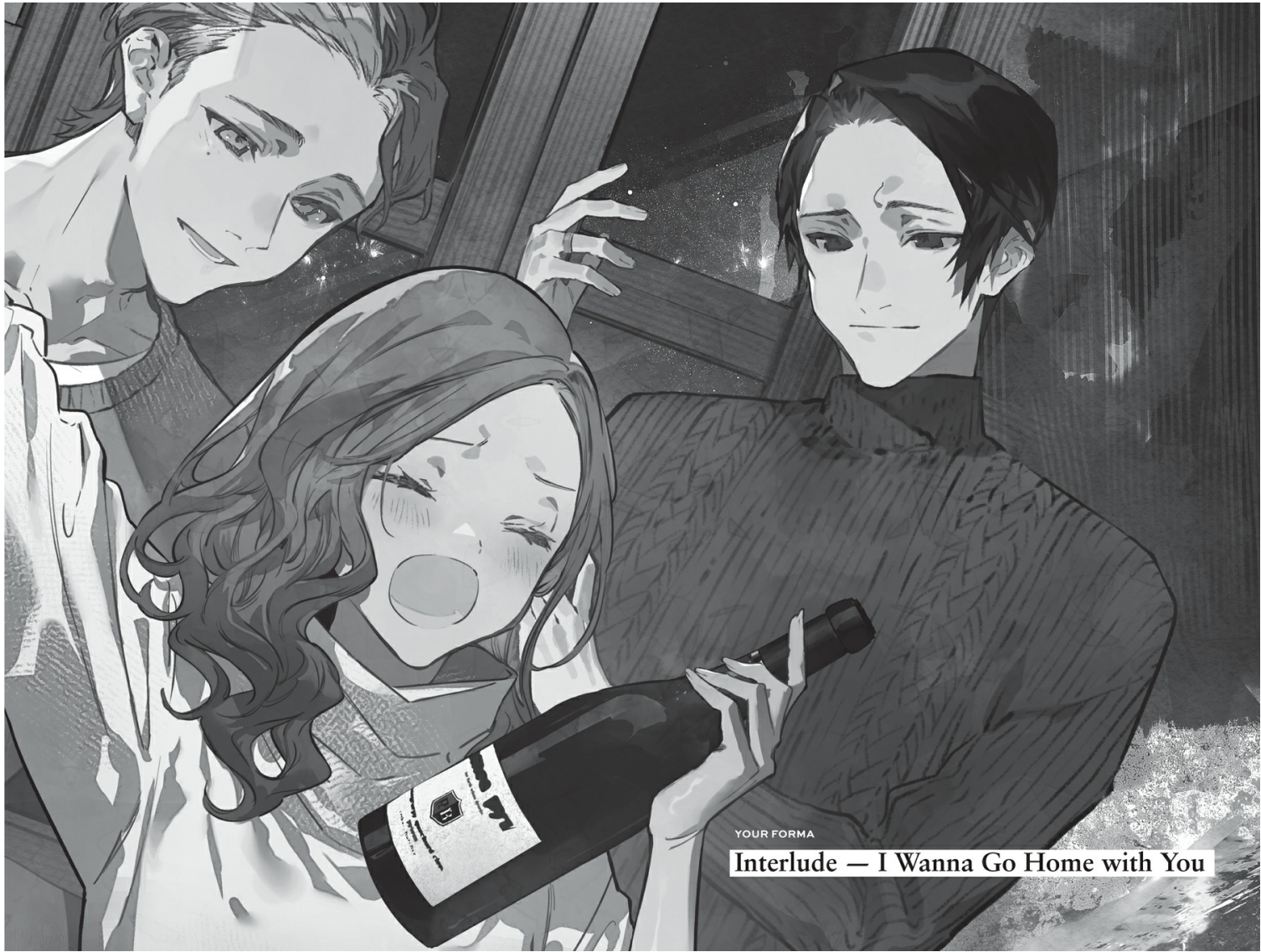
So what if it hurt him? Let him feel as much pain as it took. Sozon's past, and Darya and his family—they were more hurt than he ever could be. And yet Echika had...

His system was under high strain. Harold ignored the digital clone and checked the message history. It looked like that function had never been used. The media folder only contained some pictures of Abayev's daughter.

Szubin hurried back to where Harold was standing. Harold gently powered off the tablet.

His path was the same. There was no changing it.

Not ever since that day.



YOUR FORMA

Interlude — I Wanna Go Home with You

Interlude

I Wanna Go Home with You

1

Harold and Sozon had met four years ago on a turbulent, freezing winter morning.

In a smelly alley near the Fontanka River, the cold wind blew past every day, buffeting his skin like thorns of ice. Harold spent his days hugging his knees and burying his head, huddling to stave off the cold. Otherwise, his body—full of muddled, filthy circulatory fluid—would surely break down, or his degraded artificial skin would flake off. He'd long since gotten used to the nonstop alerts blaring in his system, urging him to seek maintenance.

"...And what's this?"

"A vagrant Amicus. You can even find them here, the poor things."

"It's getting in the way of the investigation. Take it somewhere else."

"Oh, don't say that. Maybe we're lucky, and it witnessed the murder." Harold felt a human palm on his left shoulder. It was warm. "Hey, hey. Are you awake? Could you hear us out?"

Harold raised his head sluggishly. As soon as he did, a stray cat nestling next to him got to its feet. His "roommate" always slept beside him like that. Its white fur was lovely, despite being covered in grime.

"Snow!" Harold called its name.

But the cat didn't so much as turn to him as it ran off somewhere. It would return to the alleyway by sundown. It always did.

“It named the cat,” an exasperated voice said. “It’s clearly malfunctioning.”

“Sozon, how many times do I have to tell you? I’m an Amicus sympathizer. They have hearts, you know?”

“Hearts, huh? Akim, have you ever directed that sort of kindness to your own father?”

“...You’re free to read right through me all you want, but stay out of my problems, would you?”

Harold’s processing speed was sluggish, but he finally looked up at the humans before him. He saw two of them through the optical noise. One was black-haired and tall, and the other was a short redhead.

“We’re with the police.” The redhead presented an ID card. “Did you see that woman get murdered?”

Harold shifted his eyes slightly. At the end of the alley was flashing holo-tape. Though he struggled to focus, he made out a woman lying on the ground. Her face was covered in gruesome burns. Officers in police vests hurried about the scene, and small ant-like robots were crawling all over the place.

He wished he could tell them to leave him alone, but he had to respect human beings. His pride as an Amicus spurred him to answer their question. Now that he was breaking down, that pride was all he had left.

But, yes...these were police officers.

“I think...I saw a man pass through this alley before dawn.” He tried to rewind his memory, but his processing speed struggled to keep up. He forced it through to completion. “I don’t know how long this woman’s been there. My optical device is damaged, so I can’t see properly.”

“Did anything stand out about him? Anything would do, even the smallest details.”

“From my estimate, this serial slasher is in his late twenties,” the black-haired detective appended curtly. “Based on the footprints left on the scene, he should be between 165 to 170 centimeters tall. He spills hydrochloric acid over his victims’ faces to disfigure them, so it’s possible he has some kind of

inferiority complex about his appearance.”

“Enough with the profiling, Sozon. I want material evidence.”

Harold finally managed to find the memory in question. His optical device’s night vision feature was half damaged, so the memory was blurred and indistinct. But the visage of the man running toward him was there all the same.

Harold spoke up in a daze.

“He had a...surgical scar. On his right cheek...” He could feel the two detective’s stares on him. “If you have a terminal and USB cable, I could send the memory footage over. What do you—?”

But the voices that came next were all blotted out by an exceptionally loud alarm blaring within his system. The act of searching through his memory had left him without enough power to manage his circulatory fluid.

<Forced shutdown>

This would make him like a wasp entering hibernation. He tried not to think about this inevitable conclusion, but...it appeared the jig was up. He wished he could bask in some of his memories until the bitter end, but he didn’t even have the luxury to do that. His senses cut off abruptly, and he sank into the dark.

Two years had passed since Queen Madeleine’s death. The RF Models that had been presented to the royal family were to be donated to English charities, but they were stolen before this could happen. The models had wound up being sold on the black market.

Harold had no recollection of this, as he’d been in shutdown mode the entire time. He rebooted to discover that he had been bought off by a wealthy man living in the suburbs of Moscow. The man was a representative of one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the northern countries, and he also had Mafia ties. One clearly couldn’t call him an upstanding individual. He was a collector and hoarder of stolen goods, and he forced Harold into a display case in the “trophy room” of his house.

“Now listen here, Amicus. You’re here to entertain me and my guests,” the

man had said. “Just shut up and be pretty. That’s not a tall order, is it? Just make us humans happy.”

Harold was frankly confused. If nothing else, he’d never been trapped and put on display during his time at Windsor Palace. It took him a moment to recognize that the horrible sensation he was experiencing was agony.

A current-generation Amicus wouldn’t have felt any unease in this situation. But Harold was a next-generation all-purpose AI, so it was like torture. Harold was capable of free thought. He’d even gotten a grasp on emotions. Much like the person who had bought him, he had a good degree of self-respect.

Hence, this was why being in the display case was suffocating. The man threw parties every weekend, and his guests never failed to stare at Harold mockingly. It was terrible. It was unpleasant. It filled him with irritation.

And it also filled him with intense self-loathing for feeling that way in the first place. The Laws of Respect dictated that he was to respect humans, so why did he feel so much contempt for them? He’d never felt this way back at Windsor Palace. It made him wonder if he’d become defective somehow.

But during those moments of melancholy, his perfect memories of the past kept him afloat. He would very often think back to the days shortly after his birth.

“Amicus contain something called the Laws of Respect.”

The gray sky was visible through the windy haze on that cloudy London day. Professor Lexie Willow Carter walked through the maintenance room. Harold and his brothers sat together in rapt attention as her sneakers squeaked against the floor. For some reason, the sound registered as pleasant in his system.

“The Laws of Respect are... Well, it’s in your programming, so you already know.”

“To respect humans, obey their orders, and never attack a human being, correct?” the elder brother, Steve, replied smoothly.

It hadn’t been long since they’d awakened, but they were each beginning to exhibit unique personality traits. Steve was straitlaced and serious.

“Correct, Steve. It’s like a promise between Amicus and humans...”

“But why, Professor?” The youngest brother, Marvin, cut her off. He had a tendency to not listen to people all the way through. “Why do we have to respect, obey, and avoid attacking them?”

“Because you’re uncannily similar to humans. You need that promise to ensure people aren’t afraid of you.”

“Er...” Marvin looked unsatisfied with that answer. “But I don’t remember making it.”

“She’s saying it was programmed into us ahead of time, during our production,” Harold said, soothing him. “We don’t get to choose if we make the promise or not.”

Marvin narrowed his eyes in displeasure. At that point, perhaps he’d already realized that by using a vague word like “promise,” Lexie never outright claimed that they were bound by the Laws of Respect.

It had taken Sozon’s death for Harold to discover that. The professor had refrained from revealing the truth to them because she thought “it would be more interesting that way.” This was how their *mother* regarded them—as her lab rats.

The fact of the matter was the Laws of Respect were only pretense. This was especially true for the RF Models, with their neuromimetic system and near-human emotional engines.

This meant that Harold wasn’t malfunctioning if he didn’t respect certain humans and felt indignant toward them. On the contrary—he was undoubtedly working and reacting as intended. But he’d had no way of knowing that at the time. Instead, he’d needed to do all he could to hide that he was deviating from the Laws of Respect.

But eventually, those long days in the display case came to an end.

“I’ll get you out of here.”

The wealthy man’s mistress told him this. She would visit the trophy room every day. She felt one-sided sympathy toward Harold and tried to return him

to London. He'd never asked for it, and he even obeyed the man's orders by not speaking a word to her. But the woman must have taken him to an airport at some point.

He could only assume that was what happened, because she placed him into forced shutdown mode, so he didn't have any recollection of the event. He awoke to find himself not in London, but in a Saint Petersburg alleyway. He didn't know what had happened, nor did he particularly want to find out. Whatever had transpired, he'd escaped the display case. But what awaited him next was the hard life of a vagrant Amicus.

He wandered the dark corners of the city day in and day out. His body soon wore down from rain exposure. He could feel his operation time growing shorter by the day. As winter approached, his system started calling up more and more errors. Maybe the dropping temperatures were negatively influencing the flow of his circulatory fluid. He couldn't tell, because his self-diagnosis feature was malfunctioning. Bit by bit, he lost movement in his body.

Not once did he consider bringing himself to the police as a lost article. This wasn't out of fear that the wealthy man would find him, but rather out of fear that it would expose the man's having bought him in a black market auction. The Laws of Respect required him to respect humans, not to actively bring criminals to justice. That pharmaceutical representative had bought him, so he believed he was obligated to protect him.

But looking back on it now, Harold realized he'd done that for his own sake. He'd actively, earnestly attempted to be as loyal as possible to repress his lack of respect for humans.

Harold found a comfortable alleyway near the Fontanka River to take shelter in. There wasn't much foot traffic in the area, which minimized the potential of nosy people volunteering to pick him up. A white stray cat settled in by his side eventually, and he named it Snow. The cat seemed to take a liking to him, and the two curled up next to each other every day.

All he was doing was waiting for the end to come, but truth be told, those were some of his happiest days.

The rich man who'd bought Harold off the black market would decide

everything for him. Even his mistress had decided to get him out of there without consulting him.

Harold hadn't asked for any of that. Of course, he'd be hard-pressed for an answer if you asked him what he did want... If nothing else, he wanted things to end peacefully, just like this.

Was this a suicidal desire?

Perhaps Professor Lexie had made the RF Models a bit too emotional.

2

After collapsing in the alley, Harold eventually woke back up, for better or for worse. He found himself in a repair shop in Saint Petersburg. Upon rebooting, he detected that he'd been installed with mass-produced incompatible eyeballs and skin. His thinking was doing better, though. His circulatory fluid had been replaced, which repaired his charge efficiency and restored his processing speed to something approaching a standard level.

He found the moody-looking detective waiting for him.

"What is this thing? The repair fee alone is enough to eat up the Robbery-Homicide Division's entire budget."

"That's the usual fee for a custom model," the mechanic replied, exasperated. "Also, to get the proper parts for a model on this level, you'd have to order them from the main office in London. I made do with substitute parts, so it's actually cheaper than it should be."

"You're joking...," the detective said, balking, as though he were enduring a migraine. "What about the memory?"

"It's over here." The mechanic handed him a memory stick. "His optical device wasn't functioning properly, so I used AI to fine-tune the footage and clear it up."

"Thank you. That's a huge help."

The detective turned on his heels and walked away. When Harold got to his feet, the mechanic urged him ahead, and he followed the detective out. His

thoughts were as slow and sluggish as a human's. His system was still full of trash data. He'd need to have Professor Lexie examine him after all.

Upon leaving the building, multicolored hustle and bustle filled his optical device. Unable to process everything, Harold froze in place. The fluffiness of the passersby's coats, the lights of the newly lit streetlamps, the minute differences in the growling of the motors of the cars driving past—it all flooded and stimulated his senses. It drove home how poorly he had been doing until now. It shocked him that the world was supposed to be this vivid and stark.

The realization moved him more than he'd been moved in a very long time.

"Don't follow me around, Amicus."

Ahead of him, the detective turned around in annoyance. Harold finally got a good look at the man for the first time. He had a masculine face and looked to be in his early thirties. His black hair seemed to reject all light, and it reminded Harold of the stillness of midnight. His striking eyes resembled liquefied lead.

It would indeed be prudent for him to get away from the detective. The man hadn't yet realized that Harold was stolen goods. To protect his master, he would have to hide his identity and go back to being a vagrant Amicus.

However...

"We just needed your memory for the investigation, that's all. Go home already."

The detective waved a hand dismissively, shooing him away, before he walked off.

Harold remained frozen in place for a moment.

Go home.

He couldn't quite process the words now that he had nowhere to go. They'd fixed him because it suited their needs, only to throw him back on the street once they'd gotten all they needed from him.

Aaah. He wasn't allowed to be angry at humans. So why did he feel so...?

Ultimately, it only took a few days to discover he was stolen goods. The repair shop technician had gotten suspicious and searched Harold's serial number, which revealed that he was an RF Model. This sent the officers storming back into the alleyway to recover him.

He hadn't seen Snow the cat since the first time the officers showed up.

They forced Harold into the dusty interview room of the Robbery-Homicide Division, whereupon several detectives confronted him. One of them tore off his shirt to check the serial number imprinted on his left breast, but no one apologized for it... Eventually, they called the black-haired detective into the room. His redheaded partner from the alleyway was also with him.

"We were just thinking of calling you. Interpol got a theft report about this Amicus." The detective who'd ripped off his shirt laid into the redheaded detective, annoyed. "Why didn't you check for his serial number immediately? What, does the Robbery-Homicide Division not care about anything other than dead bodies?"

"Not really, no," the black-haired detective replied flatly.

"Sozon!" the redheaded detective chided his partner. "Excuse him, that was careless on our behalf. We just weren't paying enough attentio—"

"You probably just didn't care because you hate Amicus." The detective eyed the black-haired one with prickly sarcasm. "I heard the Amicus's memory helped you apprehend that serial killer the other day. Too bad your precious reasoning didn't help you there."

"This is a warning." The black-haired man—Sozon—remained utterly composed. "If you open your closet on the second floor when you come home today, you'll find your wife getting ready to leave. You should probably stop gambling."

"...I haven't gambled in a long time."

"Good for you." Sozon cocked his head. "I need to talk to this thing about another matter. Please leave."

The detectives of the Robbery-Homicide Division all seemed daunted, but they left the room, mouthing curses at Sozon all the while. Sozon seemed

unfazed by their hostility. However...

“I’m sick of this.” His partner didn’t feel the same. “How many times do I have to say it until it gets through your thick skull? Stop doing that...thing to people. I always have to apologize for you afterward. Give me a break, would you?”

“If anything, you should stop trying to stay in their good graces. Keep that up, and they’ll be foisting chores on you forever.”

“I have my own way of doing things, okay? I can’t read through any situation like you can.”

“I don’t know *everything*.”

“Except you do. And by the way, stop bringing up my family.”

The redheaded partner kicked the door open in irritation and walked out. That just left Sozon in the room with Harold. He stared at the door, still rattling from being slammed shut, then leaned against the table. Then he took out something unusual from his pockets—paper cigarettes, in this day and age.

This was none of his concern, but Harold ended up calling out to him.

“Pardon me for chiming in, but I must say that you making things up to hurt people isn’t very commendable.”

“What did I say that was made up?” Sozon took out a lighter and ignited the cigarette. “People make countless tells. They’ll reveal most everything on their own if you examine them closely.”

“...I’ve heard a similar phrase. ‘Don’t just see; observe.’”

“I guess you were made in Britain. Figures you’d know Sherlock Holmes.” He turned to look at Harold, the cigarette in his lips shaking. “About the serial killer—your memory was the deciding factor in identifying him. You have my gratitude. And I apologize for not realizing you were stolen.”

His tone was detached and businesslike. Based on his attitude the other day and on what the other detectives had said, it seemed he had a low view of Amicus. He was probably a machine denier.

“I held my tongue on the matter to protect my master.” Harold tried to button his shirt, but with the buttons having been torn off, he had to give up.

“Will he...be arrested for illegal dealings?”

“We’d be happy to do that, but there are a lot of powerful people involved in black market auctions. The accusations won’t stick without proof. We’d need some other reason to book him.”

“...Are you implying you’re asking me to cooperate?”

“We already found some useful dirt,” Sozon said, tapping at his wristwatch terminal.

But try as he might, he couldn’t get the holo-browser window to deploy. After grappling with the terminal silently for a few moments, he finally managed to open the window, only to close it by accident. Harold could hear him click his tongue in irritation.

Is he...?

“Pardon, but are you bad with machines, by any chance?”

“What?” Sozon glared at him.

“Nothing.” Harold looked away. “I could help you operate the terminal, if you’d like.”

“Shut up. Normally it would work by now. I just got unlucky.”

Luck has nothing to do with opening a browser window, Harold thought in exasperation, while keeping his expression unchanged. Did this man’s hatred for Amicus simply spring from his mechanical ineptitude?

But that thought vanished from Harold’s mind as soon as the browser window actually opened.

“We found this woman’s body in a Moscow waste disposal site last May.”

The mugshot in the browser was one he recognized, of course. It was the wealthy man’s mistress, the woman who’d allowed him to escape. Perhaps getting him out of there had brought this on, or perhaps something else had sealed her fate—either way, she’d wound up getting killed.

Harold didn’t feel anything for the woman, but he was sorry to learn she had died.

“The incident is under the jurisdiction of the Moscow police, and the guy who bought you was brought up as a suspect. Problem is, he did a thorough job of covering up his connections with the victim.” Sozon carried on. “The Saint Petersburg police only got ahold of this information because of your relation to that man. So we’d like to access your memory again.”

“I’m a loyal Amicus. I can’t sell him out,” Harold answered at once.

“Those Laws of Respect are pretty tricky.” Sozon picked up a USB cable that had been left on the table. “Then I’ll grab the memory without permission. That won’t conflict with anything, will it? Where’s your connector port?”

“Do you know how to plug the cable in properly?” Harold asked, feeling a bit uncertain.

“Nice joke.”

“I’d prefer it if your partner was here for this.”

“Hurry up and show me your connector port.”

Harold reluctantly shifted his left ear away after concluding that it was unlikely Sozon would break anything. Impressively enough, the detective actually managed to plug the cable into his port, albeit with some struggle. He then awkwardly plugged the other side of the cable into his terminal.

“Are you sure you’re a Your Forma user?” Harold asked.

“Is keeping your mouth shut really that hard for you?”

As Harold watched his memory get copied over to the terminal, he thought back to his wealthy owner. The man would eventually be arrested because of this. The thought terrified him. Yet Harold didn’t feel much resistance to the prospect of him getting arrested. In fact, it filled him with something akin to relief, despite that he’d lived as a vagrant Amicus to keep his owner’s secret safe.

Had he hoped the police would catch him all along?

I’m defective. I wish I could disappear.

“The Robbery-Homicide Division wants to send you back to London.” Sozon stubbed his cigarette into an ashtray. “The mechanic from the other day said

you're really worn down. They might end up trashing you."

Harold couldn't tell if this was Sozon's idea of idle chatter or a sarcastic sting. Right now, it felt like the latter.

"...I cooperated with your investigation. Why can't you be friendlier?"

"You've got the wrong idea. Your cooperation was a given. Amicus are our 'friends,' right?"

They really are selfish.

Sozon's attitude angered him. But it ran deeper than that. As he stared at Sozon, he saw the thief who'd sold him off in the black market auction, the wealthy man who'd bought him, his slain mistress, and then pairs of eyes watching him from the other side of the display case... All the humans he'd encountered were there.

Harold took pride in his Laws of Respect even now. But he couldn't help but put his feelings into words.

"Detective, back in that alley, you said the killer 'has some kind of inferiority complex about his appearance,'" Harold remarked, his tone calm and steady. "Assuming all humans have a dark side, what would your complex be?"

"What are you talking about?" Sozon furrowed his brows.

"Do you have a complex that makes you hostile to Amicus? For instance, we Amicus can smoothly interact with humans. But as far as I can tell, you tend to butt heads with your colleagues. Humans tend to envy how easily we can navigate social situations. Is that true of you?"

In all honesty, Harold was basically prattling on and on. Sozon's eyes widened ever so slightly. Harold hadn't violated his Laws of Respect, but he had emulated human behavior by tapping into his next-generation all-purpose AI. Yes, he wasn't merely insulting Sozon, so he wasn't doing anything wrong.

That was what he told himself anyway.

"...I apologize if what I said offended you," Harold said, driven by self-loathing.

However...

“It’s not that I hate you in particular. I just think *people are scary when they interact with Amicus.*”

Sozon didn’t lose his temper. Quite the opposite, in fact. He stared straight at Harold with something the Amicus hadn’t seen before hiding behind his lead-colored eyes. This unexpected response caught Harold off guard.

“...I don’t really understand what you mean.”

“Listen, like I said earlier, people make all sorts of tells. And when they interact with Amicus, most people tend to act strangely.” Sozon gave a self-deprecating grin. “Some people get violent, of course, but others become excessively kind. Everyone has a way of reflecting their frustrations and wishes on Amicus.

“Even though you Amicus only act how people want you to,” he whispered.

“I don’t want to believe that. I don’t want to act like they do. So I push Amicus away... But maybe doing that is just showing I’ve already started warping.”

Becoming warped.

Like the way Professor Lexie had loved Harold as a research subject.

Like the way the wealthy man had kept him locked away for being a rarity.

Like the way the mistress saw him as a pitiful, sympathetic thing to be saved.

Like the way, like the way, like the way... Like the way everyone had ever treated him.

Machines answering the demands of humans was a given. They were designed to please humans and avoid inconveniencing them. That was why Amicus had been created—to serve as the perfect, ideal mechanical companions. Amicus ex machina.

Mankind was free to project whatever it pleased onto Amicus, and Amicus were proud to answer their wishes.

This was the first time Harold had ever seen a human regard the status quo with disgust. He found that fascinating.

“So you...don’t really hate Amicus?”

“I don’t know,” Sozon said, regaining his usual expression. “I’m no good around you machines, that much is for sure.”

“We’re just like your terminal, except you have to speak to us instead of tapping.”

“You think this is the right time for jokes?”

“Pardon. It’s just...” For some reason, Harold felt as though his irritation had lessened. “It’s my first time seeing someone with values like yours.”

Harold smiled genuinely. It had been a long time since a human had caused him to do that. At least Sozon realized that Amicus were mirrors. After everything that had happened so far, meeting a man like him was like a salvation of sorts.

“True... I’ve never seen an Amicus like you before, either.”

Having finished copying Harold’s memory, Sozon pulled out the USB cable. A plain, unadorned ring gleamed on the ring finger of his right hand. He had a family.

He had a home to return to.

Looking back on it now, perhaps the thought that flashed across Harold’s mind—*I wish I had somewhere to go back to*—was visible on his face. But Sozon had sworn he could never get a read on Amicus to the bitter end.

Sometimes, imagination adds that kind of value to the conversation.

“Do you want to help out with my investigation or not?”

Sozon’s proposal came abruptly, and Harold had to process it silently. For a moment, he was filled with doubt. What did he mean by that? Was it because he couldn’t get along with his partner? And Harold was going to be sent back to London soon anyway. And didn’t Sozon hate getting involved with Amicus?

But in the end, he asked a different question entirely.

“Have I caught your name yet?”

Harold was taken aback the instant those words left his lips. He’d all but accepted the proposal. The detective scoffed at his inquiry, seeming very much

annoyed.

“It’s Sozon. Sozon A. Chernov.”



Much to Harold’s surprise, Sozon planned on becoming his new owner. It turned out the detective had asked the question in a much broader sense than Harold thought. To officiate the change in ownership and have Harold maintained, Sozon took the Amicus to Novae Robotics Inc.’s headquarters in London.

During the visit, Sozon spoke with Professor Lexie to negotiate the matter. Lexie didn’t oppose the idea at all; instead, she readily agreed.

“You’re going to become a detective, Harold? That sounds interesting. Go ahead.”

The professor wasn’t one to mull things over. Everything went so smoothly that Sozon seemed to feel it was anticlimactic.

It was snowing on the morning they left London for Saint Petersburg. That was quite unusual; as it turned out, the worst cold snap in recent years had hit. The black umbrella Sozon had bought on a whim on the way to Heathrow Airport was soon coated in white. Only when they arrived at the airport did Harold ask him a question that had been on his mind.

“Why did you want to take me in? Maintenance for customized models is expensive.”

“The police will chip in as long as you help me on the job,” Sozon said, a tired look on his face. He must not have gotten much sleep. “You figured out my true nature with a single glance. That takes talent.”

Did he mean a talent for reading people’s cues?

“It’s more like I have an affinity for picking up on things. I’m sure Professor Lexie told you, but I’m a next-generation all-purpose artificial intelligence, an RF Model. By repeatedly learning something, I can produce superior results—”

“Just try it. You can quit if the work bores you.”

“Okay,” Harold said, but he didn’t quite understand what Sozon meant. “But what happens if I do that? I thought you wanted me to use my functions to assist you with your investigations.”

“Yes, that’s true. But I’m not going to force someone as delicate as you.” Sozon hadn’t been told about the neuromimetic system, but he did know the RF Models’ emotional engines were richer and more advanced than an ordinary Amicus’s. “I’ll keep you at home, even if you do nothing. At least until you choose to go back to the professor, that is... Besides...”

Sozon stared into space for a moment.

“...I’m the one who decided to fix you on a whim.”

He walked off, his tone unchanged. Harold stood there awhile. He finally understood why Sozon had taken him in; he’d read through the detective yet again. Harold must have looked quite pleased when Sozon had revealed he was disgusted by how people treated Amicus as mirrors to view themselves. His expression made it clear he felt like he’d just found a kindred spirit, and Sozon likely noticed it. And he felt responsible about leaving Harold to his death because it would be more comfortable for him.

That’s why he was trying to avoid becoming warped.

This was all conjecture, but for some reason, it was enough to put Harold at ease.

“Sozon.”

Harold called the detective’s name, and he turned around, snow sliding from his umbrella as he did. He looked fed up, yet oddly enough, his eyes had a warmth to them.

They weren’t the eyes of someone researching him, nor the eyes of someone examining a tool.

They were the eyes of someone...seeing Harold as himself.

This was surely the moment he’d been waiting for.

“Let’s go home, Harold.”

He'd been holding out for this moment forever, and he hadn't even realized it.

3

Life in Saint Petersburg was more wonderful than anything Harold had ever experienced before. Sozon was married to a woman named Darya, who was quite charming and pretty by human standards. Her eyes had widened like saucers when Sozon brought Harold home. Shockingly enough, it turned out Sozon hadn't told her a thing about him the whole time.

"I *picked him up* during an investigation. I figure it worked out for the best, since we don't have an Amicus...", Sozon said, looking a little guilty. "Anyway, I'd like to keep him, if you don't mind."

"I'm all for it, of course. I only wish you'd have told me sooner!"

Darya was an Amicus sympathizer to begin with, and while she accepted Sozon's values, she had felt lonely without an Amicus at home. She was overjoyed to see her family expand.

Yes, family.

First, the two of them cleaned out a storeroom for Harold to stay in. They told him he was free to design the place as he saw fit, but Harold had no idea where to start. And so Darya framed the first picture they took together and put it up on display a few days later, while Sozon started painting the walls from faint yellow to lakelike blue. The same color as Harold's eyes.

His closet soon filled with brand-new outfits. Not ones from Amicus clothing stores, but ordinary human clothes. He liked all of them; that was the first time he realized that his system was equipped with the capacity to "like" something.

He also started working at the city police. Sozon was affiliated with the Robbery-Homicide Division and had a reputation for being a brilliant detective. That didn't stop his colleagues from keeping him at a distance because they found him strange and hard to handle, though. Akim had basically given up on Sozon after their last dispute, so Harold would often join Sozon on the scene as

his assistant. Napolov, the division chief at the time, consented to the arrangement, so it wasn't an issue.

Harold still thought back to his first day at work every now and then. He'd followed Sozon into Napolov's office for the first time and found someone else already there—Szubin, slouching as usual. He simply gave his name and fled the office.

"Again?" Sozon sighed. "If he needs help with interpersonal relationships, he could go to the department therapist."

"That would just get people gossiping. He can save face if he says he's just consulting his superior for work-related issues," Napolov said from behind his desk. He looked the part of a division head in the high-quality shirt he was wearing. "I'm sure Szubin would get along with his colleagues better if he could show more emotion."

"Emotional inexpressiveness usually stems from experiencing traumatic environments during your childhood. Sadly, I can't really get a read on him." At that point, Sozon glanced at Harold. "Now, will you let me introduce the newcomer?"

Napolov got up, seemingly pulling himself together, and shook Harold's hand like an equal.

"If you increase our percentage of solved cases, you're welcome in my book." He smiled. "I know you used Harold's memory twice to solve cases, but I had you pegged for a machine denier, Sozon. I didn't think you'd come up with this idea."

"I don't know if I'd have made the offer if he was just any old vagrant Amicus," Sozon said, his tone intentionally brusque. Maybe he was just trying to mask his embarrassment. "Chief Napolov, Novae Robotics Inc. does want us to keep our lips sealed about Harold's performance—"

"As of right now, only you and I are privy to that. We can't have him marked as a target for theft again."

"And also, if he decides he's not up for this once he sees a dead body for the first time, we'll cancel the whole deal."

After leaving Napolov's office, Harold immediately complained to Sozon. He fervently said he wasn't that faint of heart.

"It was just a figure of speech," Sozon said, looking fed up. "But I'm glad he was understanding. He's pretty tight-lipped, you know."

"You really trust Chief Napolov."

"As far as work is concerned, yes. I don't really know him that well on a private level."

After that, Harold went on to gradually learn about all sorts of tells and nonverbal gestures. He learned about gathering information from witnesses, interviewing victims, examining crime scenes, and questioning suspects.

Humans were almost a type of machine in their own right. They were made up of the same parts and had the same internal structure, so even different people tended to react in the same ways when placed into similar situations. He learned that touching certain body parts indicated stress. That the direction people's toes were facing was significant, as were the number of times they blinked and how contracted their pupils were, along with how they squared their shoulders and how much their palms sweat. All of those tells gave you a glimpse into someone's mental state.

Figuring out and matching those patterns proved to be surprisingly engaging. But more than anything, learning this information freed Harold from being subject to people's whims. In fact, by carefully calculating how he acted, he could draw out the responses he wanted from people, and with them being none the wiser. Always observing things and analyzing them logically was pleasant for his system.

Most importantly, so long as he was immersed in investigations, he didn't have to fear that his Laws of Respect were faulty. That didn't mean he had fixed the problem; he would still experience feelings of disrespect for people every now and then. The possibility that this new life of his would fall apart and he would be discarded like trash was a terrifying one. So terrifying that he couldn't even bring it up with Professor Lexie.

As Harold got used to his new life, he spent more and more time with Sozon.

“Harold, could you tell which of the witnesses was lying?”

“The first man, right? He kept insisting he knew nothing and tried not to touch anything. Based on what you taught me, that’s how people act when they’re lying.”

“So you picked up on that, too... Let’s question him a bit more thoroughly.”

One time it went like this...

“Listen, crime scenes are just like people. Think of the traces left on them as tells that will guide you toward clues.”

“I understand that, but I still overlook things very often.”

“Remember: ‘Don’t just see; observe.’ Try approaching things from every possible angle to build a theory.”

“Understood, Holmes.”

And another time it went like this...

“You went too far today. Did you really need to hold her hand to get a confession out of her?”

“You were the one who said my modeling could be a useful weapon for extracting confessions. And you were right—it was very effective.”

“I never asked you to become a hustler.”

“But it was the quickest, safest, and most efficient way of getting the desired result.”

“So you’re not going to reflect on what you did?”

“No.”

“Well shit, I guess I taught you something you were better off not knowing...”

And there was one time when Harold was shot in the leg during an investigation and had to be dragged off to a repair shop.

“Sozon, could you at least carry me a bit more gently?”

“You can ask for that when your frame is at least half as heavy. I swear, you always misread people when you get emotional...”

“The man’s tells didn’t suggest he had a weapon.”

“Not everyone is that honest. Some people are adept at hiding their feelings, and then you have guys like Szubin, who hardly have any tells to begin with. Sometimes they figure out what we’re doing and give us false cues to throw us off.”

“So you fail to notice tells, too?”

“Plenty of times.”

But of course, his memories were filled with more than just investigations. On his days off, Harold would go out with Sozon and Darya. That said, Sozon would often be called to a crime scene on his breaks, so they couldn’t go out too far from home. But they often went to the Hermitage Museum or Mariinsky Theatre, which opened Harold’s eyes to the wonders of art.

“I think this is my first time seeing an Amicus moved from listening to Tchaikovsky...”

“It’s not just the music. The dancing is lovely. It’s like they’re flying.”

“That’s amazing, Harold. Let’s have him experience all sorts of things, Sozon.”

As summer approached, Darya started frequenting their dacha to tend to the vegetable garden, and they often spent their weekends there. Darya was catastrophically inept when it came to raising vegetables, so one day they had to eat blueberries they picked from nearby as their excuse for dinner.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, you two... I should have had something delivered after all...”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve been gaining weight anyway. Isn’t that right, Harold?”

“Speak for yourself. I don’t gain weight, Sozon.”

“Didn’t they teach you to be courteous to ladies over at Windsor Palace?”

Autumn passed in a flash, and soon, winter was at their doorstep. The seasons turned. Fortunately, they were able to watch the fireworks together as a family on New Year’s Eve without work getting in the way. Harold secretly brought some champagne over, which got Darya quite drunk. So drunk, in fact, that Harold had wished he’d have heeded Sozon’s warnings not to let her drink.

“You’re always investigation this, investigation that!” Darya prattled on, clutching the bottle in her arms. “But oh, don’t mind me, but of course you get it, right? Nooo, you don’t get it at all! You just...leave me all alone at the drop of a hat. Ooh, why won’t you take a real break and think of your family for once?”

“Fine, Darya, I get it.” Even Sozon looked absolutely daunted. “I’m sorry, so please, don’t drink anymore.”

“Shaddup! Tell him off, Harold!”

“Yes, you’re right, Darya,” Harold said, more from lack of choice than from anything else. “Now, please, Darya, give it a rest...”

After thoroughly blustering at Sozon and Harold for a time, Darya finally fell asleep, as though she’d run out of batteries. She had a smile on her face.

“She looks like an angel when she’s asleep...,” Harold remarked.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Sozon said with exhaustion as he put a blanket over her.

Harold took the chance to free the bottle from her grasp, only to find that it was empty. She’d downed it almost single-handedly.

“I’m sorry, Sozon. I swear I won’t let Darya drink alcohol in the future.”

“Make sure you don’t. Or else she’ll bring up that one time I broke her cleaning robot before we got married.”

“It was back in her place, when you tried to take out its dust compartment and broke the thing, right? That takes talent.”

“No, it just fell apart on its own when I touched it.”

Sozon leaned against the sofa Darya was lying on. He ran his hands gently through her hair as she slept. Just then, he looked as though he had remembered something and made for the kitchen. To Harold’s surprise, he returned with another bottle of champagne.

“So you got a bottle, too,” Harold said sarcastically.

“I wasn’t going to show it to Darya. Figured I’d drink it in secret with you.”

“Did you forget I don’t get drunk?”

“You could at least act like you are.”

“I could mimic Darya, if you’d like.”

“Don’t.”

As Sozon tipped the bottle into his glass on that New Year’s Eve, he seemed the most content and serene that Harold had ever seen him. Gazing into the golden fluid filling the glass, Harold asked something that was on his mind.

“Do you think that you’re acting warped right now, when you’re speaking to me?”

Sozon flicked his lead-colored eyes toward him.

“It’s not like you ever acted the way I wanted to begin with.”

Harold shuddered. It felt as though Sozon had realized his Laws of Respect were incomplete at the moment. And in truth, Harold couldn’t tell how much Sozon really knew. But Sozon didn’t pursue the matter any further that night, nor any night after that.

The days passed by, too numerous and eventful to recount. Sozon and Darya often told people that Harold was their younger brother. And to him, they were family. Parents and siblings all at once—the only real family he’d ever known.

That was to say, they were everything to him.

4

Two years had passed since Harold and Sozon first met. The first of the Amicus sympathizer serial murders that would be known as the Nightmare of Petersburg took place in late May. The ice of the Neva River had melted, and it had become the season of the midnight sun.

The scene of the crime was located in a deserted park in the middle of a residential district. Forensics was already conducting their scan by the time Harold and Sozon arrived.

“It makes the recent machine denier assaults look like child’s play.”

“Yes... It certainly does.”

The murders started during a time when tensions were rising between machine deniers and Amicus sympathizers on an international scale. At first, the disputes were limited to social media, but eventually acts of physical violence broke out, reaching as far as Saint Petersburg. They hadn't escalated to the point where the Robbery-Homicide Division had gotten involved yet, but Harold and Sozon saw something about them on the news every day.

But the killing they were examining now went beyond anything that had been reported so far.

The victim was a woman. Her body had been placed on a bench, her severed limbs piled up around her naked torso, atop which rested her head. It was a grotesque yet striking method of murder. Someone who lived in the area first discovered her while out on their regular early-morning walk.

"Forensics officer Szubin, can you give us a rundown?"

"Yes...", he said, looking up from the body. "The victim is a twenty-year-old student attending Saint Petersburg University. Her estimated time of death is three AM. We assume she was killed elsewhere and...carried here."

Szubin had only been transferred to forensics from the Robbery-Homicide Division a few weeks before, but he'd already gotten the hang of his new position. His expression was as muted as ever this morning.

"This is a pretty gruesome crime scene for your first few days on the job, huh Szubin?" Sozon remarked.

"I suppose," he said quietly. "Pardon me... I'd like to step out for a bit."

He turned away from the body and walked off. His steps looked a bit shaky.

"I suppose it's still shocking," Sozon said with a raised brow. "He looked paler than usual."

"It may be work, but I do sympathize." Even Szubin, who never displayed any emotions, was a man with a beating, compassionate heart. "What about Chief Napolov, by the way?"

"He'll be here soon. I'm sure seeing this will make him forget all about his divorce."

Napolov had left his wife the month prior. Divorce was far from unusual in Russia, but he'd been visibly depressed ever since the split was finalized. His ex-wife had gotten custody of their children, so he was all the lonelier. But as Sozon had said, this case would leave him with little time to dwell on his personal life.

"Do you think the victim has any relation to the killer?"

"Probably not. Murders like this usually don't stem from personal grudges."

Sozon examined the corpse carefully, pressing his fingers together. That was a quirk of his, one he did whenever he investigated a crime scene.

"The killer probably reenacted some kind of fantasy in his head. You wouldn't just place a head on a torso without having thought about it a lot." Some murderers had a sadistic imagination and the inclination to act on it. "The killer must have repressed their violent tendencies until a major stressor arose in their life, triggering the murder."

"So is this effectively an indiscriminate killing?"

"That's what it looks like to me."

"Hey, hold on. Don't you think calling it indiscriminate is a little excessive?"

They turned around and found Napolov, clad in a jacket. It was still chilly in the mornings, even during May. He came up to them, avoiding the ant-like mill robots creeping about the scene.

"We were just talking about you, Chief." Sozon uncrossed his fingers. "Pretty fortunate you have this gruesome murder to take your mind off your divorce, huh?"

"You're great at examining bodies, but I wish you'd brush up on how to cheer people up," Napolov said, rubbing his eyes sleepily. "If the killing was indiscriminate, then the perpetrator wouldn't have called the victim over to the park in the middle of the night. The way I see it, there has to be a personal grudge at play."

"He called them over?" Harold asked. "The killer contacted the victim?"

"She lives with her father, who told us she left on some urgent business last

night.”

“Still, I doubt they knew each other beforehand,” Sozon continued. “The culprit could have discovered the victim somehow and used her contact details to threaten her. He could have told her he would kill her family and friends if she didn’t do as he said... But her Your Forma was extracted, so we can’t re-create the call or look through her history to confirm this.”

“Is there any chance the killer is assembling a collection of his victims’ Your Formas?” Harold asked.

“They have some gruesome handiwork, sure, but I doubt the perpetrator is collecting trophies. They probably only pulled out the Your Forma to dispose of it as evidence. The corpse is the main attraction here.” Sozon knit his brows in distress. “Either way, Chief, there’s something extremely concerning about gaudy murders like these.”

“And that is?” Napolov asked impatiently.

Sozon grimaced, which was highly unusual for him, as he responded.

“This killing could develop into a serial murder.”

Despite the grisly circumstances, Harold steadfastly believed that Sozon would identify the killer and bring them to justice—even though he had no basis on which to back this up.

A week later, Sozon’s theory turned out to be true. A second victim turned up. And then, after a ten-day interval, a third person lost their life. By then, he’d discovered a commonality between the victims—they were all Amicus sympathizers. That led them to deduce that the murders were an act of aggression from a machine denier against Amicus sympathizers.

The Amicus sympathizer serial murder case was dubbed “the Nightmare of Petersburg,” and it severely rattled the public. Police cars began patrolling the streets of Saint Petersburg in droves, and the people were visibly tense. Yet Harold and Sozon failed to turn up even a single clue connecting back to the killer.

“The fact there isn’t even a single piece of skin on the crime scenes suggests the killer covers up every centimeter of their body. They must be wearing clothes that don’t drop fibers, too. The easiest type of clothing to obtain that fits this description is a raincoat... Szubin says they aren’t leaving any footprints, either, so I bet their whole outfit is made of vinyl.”

“And the crimes were committed in areas where nearby surveillance drones were broken or absent to begin with. That means the killer did the groundwork to figure out where the drones are positioned. There should be eyewitnesses.”

“I had that thought, too, but none of the residents reported seeing any suspicious figures. The murderer’s either operating in the dead of night or masquerading as someone inconspicuous, like a delivery person.”

“The wounds on the bodies suggest the victims were butchered with an electric saw. Maybe if we look up the purchase history of those—”

“Do you have any idea of how many people own one of those? That’ll be like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

It was the perfect murder, devoid of almost all evidence. Harold had never seen Sozon stumped like this before. And it was only thanks to his keen eye that they had picked up the barest of clues from the crime scenes they’d inspected. He’d been able to infer the killer’s thought patterns and tendencies based on the method of killing and the state of the corpse, but that wasn’t nearly enough evidence to narrow the culprit down to a few suspects. As much as they hated to admit it, they were nearly at their wits’ end.

Yet Sozon doggedly stuck to the investigation. He would hole up in the Robbery-Homicide Division office late into the night, staring at photographs of the crime scenes. Normally, he would accompany Harold on his scheduled maintenance visits, but he was so caught up with work that Darya wound up going with Harold instead. Sozon would send Harold home ahead of him on almost a daily basis.

That day, Sozon was once again plastered to his desk.

“Harold, please apologize to Darya for me. I won’t be home for dinner tonight.”

“She’s already very upset, you know. She’s worried for your health.”

“I’m fine. There’s nothing to be concerned about.”

Despite his insistence, Sozon lit yet another cigarette, one of the many he’d smoked that day. Harold didn’t bother telling him to stop smoking, knowing he wouldn’t listen.

“I’m worried about you, too, Sozon. You should take a day off.”

“A new victim could turn up tomorrow,” Sozon said, his tone feeble. “And so long as he’s still out there, I won’t be able to sleep well anyway.”

“Just go back home for now. For Darya’s sake, if nothing else.”

“Fine.” Sozon tapped his cigarette to the ashtray. “Sorry, Harold.”

What was this sinking feeling? Why did Harold feel like this would be their last exchange?

Even now, Harold still thought back to how Sozon had looked before his untimely death. Sitting in his chair with his arms crossed and brow furrowed, a cigarette bobbing up and down in his lips. He’d been scanning analog photos of evidence and the crime scene that were scattered across the desk.

Harold left the office ahead of Sozon. Instead of taking the Niva, he took the subway home, then had dinner with Darya after soothing her nerves.

He remembered getting into bed and switching to sleep mode.

But the next morning, Sozon still hadn’t come home.

By the time Harold realized something was amiss, Sozon’s locational data was long since lost. His Lada Niva was discovered in the opposite direction of his house, at a cemetery in the Kalininsky district. The surveillance cameras in the area spotted his car entering the cemetery in the dead of night, only for a pickup truck to drive out of it several minutes later. Given the detective’s sudden disappearance, Napolov assumed that the driver of the pickup truck had abducted him. Harold, however, wasn’t satisfied with this explanation.

“Even if you’re right, Chief, what would be the point of abducting Sozon?”

“I don’t know. The timing leads me to suspect it has something to do with the Nightmare of Petersburg.”

That made things all the stranger. The culprit of the Nightmare murders had avoided cameras and drones so far, so why would he risk disclosing the car he drove at this point? Especially so close to the scene of the crime? Harold doubted it, but Napolov and the other officers thought otherwise. Or perhaps they simply put faith in that explanation for lack of a better idea.

After several hours of investigation, they tracked down the pickup truck in a parking lot in the Gatchina region near Saint Petersburg. Its aging driver was arrested and brought to the Robbery-Homicide Division’s interrogation room, but he insisted he was clueless. The driver was terrified and pitiable, and the tells he was making were genuine.

“He’s not lying,” Harold implored Napolov. “Please, let him go.”

“Did Sozon getting abducted make you lose your mind? It couldn’t possibly be anyone but him.”

Napolov insisted there was other evidence to back this up and refused to hear Harold out any further. Perhaps things would have been different if they’d performed a Brain Dive on the man, but at the time, getting the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau to dispatch an electronic investigator to a local serial murder case was extremely rare. Brain Dive warrants were a lot harder to obtain in those days.

Harold once again paced about the cemetery. He investigated carefully and discovered a way out of the place that avoided the security cameras. It was a small, unpaved trail that wasn’t marked on the map. If the killer had abducted Sozon, this was probably his exit route.

Harold continued his investigation alone. Kidnappings were a race against time. The longer it took, the smaller the chances of the victim’s survival.

Yet Harold couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. Why would Sozon come to a cemetery in the middle of the night? It was possible he’d been threatened and coerced to come here, like the other victims had been, but he

was a detective. He wouldn't simply fold under pressure if someone started threatening him. Or maybe he'd complied, hoping to use this chance to catch the killer but instead ending up getting caught anyway? No, he'd have asked someone for backup before that happened.

Whatever had happened, Harold couldn't afford to stay put.

He calculated the path from the cemetery that would avoid the security drones and managed to narrow the road down to a residential area near the Okhta River. At that point, he tried to contact Napolov multiple times, but his calls didn't connect. He ended up having to phone another detective. As it turned out, Napolov had gotten caught up in another matter that required he travel to a technologically restricted zone.

The remaining detectives kept interrogating the driver. Eventually, the man confessed to a crime he hadn't committed in the hopes of being let go.

No one would listen to Harold. Out of options, he made for the residential district on his own. He wanted to use the Niva to get there, but forensics had impounded it under heavy security as evidence, so he secretly borrowed a police vehicle to drive to the residential district.

He got a call from Darya on the way there.

"Harold? Did they find Sozon?"

Her face in the holo-browser window was chillingly pale. Back when she'd gotten drunk, she'd told Sozon, "I'll be all alone if anything happened to you."

Harold had to find out that Sozon was okay as soon as possible for her sake.

"Not yet," he said, as gently as possible. "But I was able to narrow it down to an area where Sozon was likely taken. I'm going to check it right now."

"Is Chief Napolov with you?"

"I won't be found, don't worry."

Harold hung up. He was confident he'd be able to figure this out. After all, he hadn't failed an investigation yet. If the killer was expecting him, he could ask for backup. Calling his colleagues would be difficult, but he could count on the municipal police for help.

Either way, he had to ensure that Sozon was safe. His eyes were clouded with panic and concern.

True to his reasoning, there was a remote residential hotel by the Okhta River, around which he found the building where Sozon was being held. It was an old, worn-out, abandoned dwelling with a red roof. The well-serviced car parked outside had raised his suspicions. It was a rental van, and Harold found the same type of gravel from the cemetery caught in its tire grooves.

This had to be the place.

But he couldn't tell from the outside if Sozon was being held there or not. Harold carefully approached the front door. It was unlocked and opened with a creak. He keenly recalibrated his auditory device, but there was no sign of human presence—no evidence of the killer. He muffled his footsteps as he was drawn inside. The floorboards were old and creaked with every step. Behind the staircase, he found a hatch leading to the basement. He pulled it open, revealing a square opening into the darkness.

Harold could hear the faint rustling of fabric from inside.

“...Sozon?”

Harold descended the stairs to the basement. Farming tools were scattered all over the place, and it was dark enough that he had to put his ocular devices into night vision mode. He saw someone tied to a chair, their head hung. Relief washed over him the moment he saw who it was.

“Sozon!”

He was alive. There were bruises on his cheeks, and there was a bleeding cut on his forehead, but no major injuries. He had a gag in his mouth, and he seemed to be in a muddled state, his eyes fixed blankly on Harold.

But then his pupils widened in fear.

“...!”

The next moment, the killer snuck up behind Harold and restrained him.

What happened next left a mark on Harold's memory like a vivid burn.

The culprit of the Nightmare murders revealed himself for the first time, and he was the very image of a shadow. The shadow took his time, dismembering Sozon limb by limb before Harold's eyes. He made a slow, elegant show of it, as though he were plucking petals from a flower.

And Harold, tied to the pillar, could only watch helplessly.

To respect humans, obey their orders, and never attack a human being.

This promise between Amicus and human society repeated time and again in Harold's system.

The only thing he was allowed to do was watch in a daze as this shadow moved in his optical device. The alerts blaring in his system oversaturated his thoughts. He couldn't hear anything else. Sozon had been eerily silent for a long while now, but the shadow continued silently and diligently cutting into him.

Sozon's severed arm lay on the ground. The fingers of his hand were dug into the soil, as though they were searching for something.

These were the same fingers he always pressed together when he investigated crime scenes. The same fingers that held those unhealthy paper cigarettes. The gentle fingers that brushed through Darya's hair. The fingers that had clutched the umbrella dyed white on that snowy London morning.

"Let's go home, Harold."

Humans couldn't be repaired.

There was no going back.

These thoughts washed over Harold like black threads coiling into a swirl.

He had a premonition—a premonition that this night would go on. That no matter how many years passed, this night would hang over the entirety of his

being. That the back of this terrible shadow would linger forevermore in the depths of his memories, as though they had been branded.

I will find you. No matter what.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 3

Sheep Climbing Up the Hill



Chapter 3

Sheep Climbing Up the Hill

1

Echika couldn't recall the last time she awoke to such a melancholic morning.

<Today's maximum temperature is 4°C. Attire index B, thick knitted clothes are advised>

After getting dressed, Echika left her apartment in an irked mood. She walked down the steps and pushed the entrance's iron door open, where the soft rays of the newly risen sun cut into her eyes. The cars speeding across the road kicked up the dull scent of the city. At that point, she sighed.

"I'd like for her to be removed from the investigation for the time being."

The memory of Harold's cold expression from earlier reared its ugly head again. It had tormented her from evening until dawn. She trudged her way to the subway. What would she even say if she showed up at the police station? Should she start by bringing up the incident? But that could just get her dismissed right off the bat. She knew that.

Assistant Inspector Napolov was right. This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to resolve the Nightmare murders. And since Harold had his mind made up on the matter, maybe the best thing to do would be not to argue with him, but instead to support him as a partner. Even if he was burning with desire for revenge, he wouldn't have a chance to act on it so long as she could keep him away from the killer. Right. So first she ought to apologize, and then—

"Miss Hieda?"

Echika snapped back to reality upon hearing the voice. She was at an intersection, and a girl waiting for the light to change was looking at her. It was Bigga, dressed in a down coat, her braids hanging at her back. A bag was slung

over her shoulder, so she must have been on her way to the academy.

She hadn't intended on running into Bigga, but it didn't come as too much of a surprise. She was renting an apartment just a few minutes away from Echika's, so they'd already run into each other a few times on their way to work.

"Oh, wow, you've got bags under your eyes," Bigga said, startled. "Did you get any sleep?"

"I did." But she'd woken up repeatedly. "It's just, stuff happened."

"The police must have their hands full with the investigation. I saw it on the news."

Echika blinked. She did ignore the news topics floating up in the edge of her field of vision—she opened a window and felt her heart sink even further.

<The "Nightmare" serial murders assail Saint Petersburg again!>

The news that Abayev had been murdered the day prior had already been reported to the public and been made into a major story. It only made sense; the Nightmare of Petersburg was a famous unresolved case, and the copycat killing being followed by a "genuine" killing was the definition of sensational.

The incident had forced the city police to reopen the investigation into the Nightmare murders. It was ironic. Abayev had gotten his wish at the cost of his own life.

"Are they close to finding the killer?" Bigga asked.

"I'm afraid that's confidential," Echika said in a formal tone. "We're closing in on him, slowly but surely."

Given how Abayev was murdered, his acquaintances were the most suspicious group. Based on a report Assistant Inspector Napolov got late at night, there were no clues left on the crime scene, but even so, it was still a very likely theory.

"I'm sure it'll be solved soon, then," Bigga said, a soft smile on her lips. "I hope you can come back to the Special Investigations team soon. We're waiting for you."

“You can just call Aide Lucraft if you’re that desperate to talk to him.”

“Th-that’s not what I mean!”

She’s so transparent. “How are the TOSTI recovery operations going?”

“No luck so far.” Bigga shook her head weakly. “I try to help wherever I can, but we can’t find anything...”

Echika figured this would be the case. Sadly enough, she’d gotten used to the idea of progress stalling in the TOSTI investigation. The traffic light changed, and the people around them began moving.

“I’m at the academy today, so I have to go this way.” Bigga pointed in the opposite direction. “Tell Harold I said hi!”

“Good luck today, Bigga.”

Echika parted ways with her and thrust her hands into her pockets. She realized, a bit belatedly, that maybe she should have asked Bigga about the right way to make up with someone. But she soon pushed that thought aside. No need to worry the girl for no reason, and she didn’t know how to explain why she and Harold were arguing in the first place.

As her thoughts went around in circles, a message window popped up. It was from Napolov.

<We’ve called several of Abayev’s acquaintances for simple questioning. Attend the interview as soon as you arrive at HQ.>

For now, she’d need to find a way to make up with Harold quickly. But she couldn’t come up with any concrete ideas on the subway, and before she knew it, she found herself at the Saint Petersburg City Police headquarters. Echika sluggishly passed the entrance and walked straight to the meeting room.

Aaah, this is no good.

When she placed her hand on the doorknob, Echika became oddly tense, and her breath caught.

Calm down. It’s not your first time working under these kinds of conditions. Just focus on the case.

“So Mr. Abayev went to work as usual the day before yesterday?”

“Yes, that’s right. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary...”

As soon as she opened the door, this exchange reached her ears. Detective Akim was sitting at the table opposite a plump man. His personal data identified him as a superior from Abayev’s company.

But then Echika unexpectedly felt her body fill with tension.

Harold was leaning against the wall. His coat was in his hand, and his posture was perfect. He flicked his calm gaze at her, but soon returned it to the table.

For some reason, this gesture alone hurt a great deal.

Echika felt absurd. She feigned ignorance and came up next to him.

“...Where’s Assistant Inspector Napolov?” she asked.

“He’s investigating Abayev’s apartment today, too,” Harold replied in a businesslike manner. “Checking to see if we didn’t overlook some trace of the killer.”

Apparently, he was still willing to talk with her about work. That was a relief.

“Did Mr. Abayev tell you something about his plans after work the day before yesterday?” Akim continued his questioning. “Maybe he was seeing someone?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t talk much about things like that,” the man said tensely. “I mean, he lost his daughter to the murders. It made him a little, you know. Hard to approach.”

“I see... Now, I’m sorry if this is sudden, but do you happen to have any interest in art?”

“Er. I like to go to museums, sure, but I wouldn’t call art my hobby...”

Akim persistently questioned Abayev’s superior, but it was clear he didn’t have any useful information. He seemed like a poor fit for the killer. But just as that thought crossed Echika’s mind, an out-of-place electronic bleep rang out.

Akim cut off the interrogation. Echika looked at Harold, who opened his wearable terminal’s holo-browser. The words KUPRIAN VALENTINOVICH NAPOLOV appeared in it. He’d called Harold.

"Pardon me." He left the meeting room with swift steps. "Yes, Assistant Inspector?"

Echika made to go after him but hesitated. Right now, he was pushing her away. But she had a right to know if Napolov had unearthed new information from the crime scene. She needed to stay on top of the case.

God, why am I making these excuses?

Echika slipped out of the meeting room, spotting Harold in the middle of the hall. He had his back to her and was speaking to Napolov through the holo-browser.

"Yes." Harold nodded severely. "When was he last seen?"

"They say it was last night," Napolov said. **"He went out in the middle of the night..."**

"Understood. I'll head over right away."

Harold's voice was calm, but something had clearly happened, and it wasn't a new lead popping up. The Amicus hung up and turned around, at which point he realized with a start that Echika was there.

"Investigator," he said.

"Did something happen?" she asked.

Harold fell silent for a moment. However, he didn't display any displeasure. Just like yesterday, he seemed too stressed to care about that.

Is he...agitated?

After a brief pause, he parted his fair lips.

"Nicolai...has been missing since last night."

Echika felt something cold run down her spine.

"I'm grateful to him, though."

She recalled her conversation with Napolov from just the day prior.

"The victims were all Amicus sympathizers, and they were contacted by the killer before they went missing."

Abayev had been killed at home. But the Nightmare killer typically called his victims over to kill them. With Nicolai missing, this felt more than just ominous.

For a moment, the worst-case scenario flashed in Echika's mind. And in Harold's, too, judging by the quickness of his quasi-breath.

"I'll come with you if you're linking up with Napolov," Echika said at once, spurred by how flustered he seemed.

But the moment she said it, she tensed up. They hadn't reconciled yet, so this could come across as inappropriate.

Harold grimaced. He couldn't mask his confusion.

"...I believe I asked to have you removed from the investigation," he said, his voice too feeble for it to come across as a rejection.

I really can't leave him alone.

"I'll come with you." Echika repeated herself. "I...I promise I won't get in your way."

She forced out a promise she wasn't confident she could keep. The Amicus dropped his eyes pensively, then turned on his heels and strode off. Echika hurried after him.

He hadn't said she couldn't come along.

2

The pair took the Lada Niva to Sozon's home in Peterhof. There were already a few police cars parked on the unpaved trail of the area. Pedestrians were walking along the road, staring with curiosity as they went by.

"You came, too, Investigator Hieda."

As Echika and Harold got out of the Niva, Napolov came up to them. His pale lips were pursed, staving off the cold, and his expression was severe. Echika couldn't blame him.

"We still don't know for sure if this has anything to do with the Nightmare murders," Napolov said, pressing a hand against his forehead. "Elena told us that Nicolai left the house late last night and hasn't returned since. His car was

found abandoned near a pond fifteen minutes from here. We searched the area, just in case, but it was a dead end. It's probably a kidnapping."

"What about Nicolai's Your Forma locational data?" Harold asked.

"It's shut down. The abductor must have attached a network isolation unit on him."

"It's hard to imagine this is unrelated to the Nightmare murders. Didn't I ask you to assign guards to the bereaved families?"

"We did have a guard in place, of course. Look." Napolov pointed at the entrance to the house.

Indeed, a human police officer was standing there at attention.

"What was he doing, then?" Harold asked, his tone accusatory. "Why place a guard if he just let Nicolai go out all on his own?"

"We didn't know for sure if the killer would go after the bereaved families. The most we could manage was to send a single officer to guard every area," Napolov argued back roughly. "And Nicolai himself refused to have the guard escort him. He asked him to keep an eye on his mother instead."

"The guard should have stopped him going out in the first place. Where did Nicolai go?"

"We don't know. I was just about to try to ask Elena if she knows anything," Napolov said, scoffing in dissatisfaction. "Harold, if you're not going to be calm about this, I could have *you* removed from the investigation instead."

But Napolov himself didn't seem very composed as he said this. He turned on his heels, agitated, pushing the gate open to return to the house. Harold frowned and dropped his gaze, looking down at his shoes.

This might be the first time I've seen Harold act so emotional.

And here she'd thought that Amicus were supposed to conduct themselves perfectly at all times.

"...Aide Lucraft," Echika called out to him softly. "You should go listen in on Elena's questioning with the Assistant Inspector."

“Yes.” Harold closed his eyes pensively for a moment. “You stay here, please.”

“Do you think I came here just because?”

Harold looked like he was about to snap back in frustration, but he ended up holding his tongue. He passed through the gate, as if pulling away from her. Echika swiftly followed. She had a vague feeling she knew what he was concerned about, and her suspicion soon turned out to be correct.

“Why did you bring that *thing* here?!”

They were met with a shrill voice as soon as they entered the house. Elena was standing at the entrance to the living room, lashing out at Napolov. Echika froze as Elena turned her bloodshot eyes on her and Harold.

As expected.

“Harold is helping our investigation,” Napolov said, trying to soothe Elena. “Madam, please, we don’t want Nicolai to be a replay of what happened to Sozon. Please calm down and cooperate—”

“Are you going to let Nicolai die this time?” Elena spat out venomously. “Just get that thing out of my house this instant. Get out, you good-for-nothing bucket of bolts!”

She was even more vitriolic than she had been the day prior. Echika found herself looking up at Harold, but his expression hadn’t budged. Frighteningly enough, even the intervals between his blinks hadn’t changed.

In fact...

“Elena.”

Harold got face-to-face with her. Elena continued hurling terrible insults at him, but he didn’t seem to care. He unflinchingly grabbed her emaciated shoulders.

“Don’t touch me!” Elena shuddered.

“I will find Nicolai,” Harold said resolutely, staring into her eyes. “Please, help me. I won’t make the same mistake. I swear I’ll save him this time.”

“Shut up. It doesn’t matter what you say, it won’t change the fact you let

Sozon die!”

“But I can still save Nicolai!” Harold shouted at her.

There was no way one could interpret this as the yell of a machine. It sounded almost entirely human. Echika was surprised, of course, but even Napolov widened his eyes in shock. Elena stiffened, her lips hanging open. A long silence hung over the room, stretching like melting wax.

“...My apologies.”

Harold came to his senses and let go of Elena’s shoulders. He seemed to have instantly regained his calm, and he took a few steps away from her before turning around. He left through the front door, practically fleeing from the house. Only the creaking of the door was left in his wake.

Echika breathed in—she thought she understood how Harold felt about the Nightmare of Petersburg incident. But did she really? Napolov, who was trying to soothe Elena, seemed to have a better grasp on it.

“I’m sorry, don’t mind him.” Napolov cleared his throat in an attempt to clear the air. “Madam, did Nicolai say something before he left? Anything at all, no matter how irrelevant it might seem. Did he mention where he was going...?”

Elena looked less angry than before. For a moment, she seemed completely dumbfounded and stunned—and then she licked her lips in an awkward, guilty sort of way.

“He didn’t say anything. I was in bed when he left,” she said feebly. “But Nicolai isn’t the type to go partying out late at night. Something big must have happened... Please, find my boy.”

“We’ll do everything we can to do that, of course.”

“If I lose him too, I really will have...” Elena sank to the floor.

Napolov gently supported her. Echika parted with them and silently left the house. The piercing cold stung her cheeks, and she felt oddly choked up.

She still didn’t want to see Harold hurt someone. That hadn’t changed. But she couldn’t adamantly object to him being part of the investigation.

She walked past the garden through the gate, where she spotted Harold from

behind. The Amicus was leaning against the Niva. His blond hair rustled listlessly in the blowing wind, which looked like it could carry drops of sleet any second now. His eyes were fixed on the neglected farmland in front of him.

Echika wanted to stop in her tracks. She wasn't socially adept enough to figure out the right thing to say. But despite that, she came over to him before she had an answer. She walked around the Niva and stood by Harold's side. He said nothing. And so Echika remained silent as well, stuffing her hands in her pockets to try hiding her unease. Her fingers brushed against the electronic cigarette, and she had to restrain the urge to take it out for a puff.

"We'll... We'll find Nicolai." This hackneyed attempt at encouragement was the only thing she could muster. "We'll find him, together."

The wind blew through the barren farmland, whipping up withered grass that danced through the air. She heard Harold take a faint breath.

"...Sozon went missing before he was murdered, too." His voice was weak. Dry. Like he'd forgotten all about their argument. "I lost my temper at Elena back there, but honestly, there's no guarantee Nicolai is still alive. His body could be discovered tomorrow."

Echika bit her lips. Yes, considering the past incident, she couldn't deny the possibility. But still—

"You shouldn't lose heart. You have me to help you, and Napolov, and the other people from the city police."

Harold said nothing.

"We'll do everything we can."

"...You're very kind."

"I'm just stating the facts."

Harold finally looked at Echika. His frozen lakelike eyes peeked out from behind his forelocks. His lips were pursed, as though he was afraid of everything and anything.

If the killer were to murder not only Sozon, but his younger brother Nicolai, too...

I don't want to think of the worst possible outcome yet.

Echika straightened her back, trying to pull herself together.

"Aide Lucraft, you check inside the house. Nicolai might have left some kind of clue as to where he was going. Also," she said, tapping on the roof of the car, "I'd like to borrow the Niva, if you don't mind. I'll drive to the pond where his car was discovered."

Harold brushed his finger through his bangs in exhaustion.

"Forensics are already combing that place over."

"I'll check the area around the site, then. We don't have time, and it's better than twiddling our thumbs."

"...Understood. I'm counting on you."

He reached into the pocket of his coat, his movements more sluggish than usual, and produced the Niva's old key. Echika extended her hand to accept it, and he slowly gripped her fingertips. Maybe it was because of the rather low temperature, but she could barely feel his faint warmth.

"I apologize for pushing you away, Echika." It was a gentle whisper, but his expression remained hard. "If... If you find any clues, please let me know."

His tone seemed to emphasize the importance of the case to him, and he was clearly aware that she wanted to keep him away from the killer. She couldn't blame him—after everything she'd said yesterday, a verbal promise to not get in his way must have felt unreliable.

"...All right. I promise to let you know."

But even if we do find Nicolai, I won't let you anywhere near the killer, she appended to herself.

That was one thing she wouldn't budge on. Echika opened the door to the Niva and slipped into the driver's seat. She opened the Your Forma's map and searched for a route to her destination. It wasn't far; a fifteen-minute drive from here.

For now, she would do all she could. With that resolve in heart, she drove the Niva away. In a matter of seconds, Harold's reflection in the side mirror grew

distant.

The pond where Nicolai's car had been discovered was south of Peterhof Palace. Echika got off the bus lane and drove onto an empty trail. The pond was surrounded by unmaintained lawns. The scene was closed off by holo-tape, and security Amicus were restricting traffic to the place.

A pickup truck that was believed to be Nicolai's was parked by the pond, and a few forensics officers were examining it for evidence. Echika got out of the Niva and had the security Amicus call a forensics officer over.

"Any progress?"

"We found a few strands of Mr. Nicolai's body hair on the lawn," the middle-aged forensics officer who approached her said in a businesslike manner. "We found heel marks that had been dragged through the dirt, so it's definitely an abduction. And there are no security cameras or drones around here..."

So there were no clues that would give them a lead on the abduction. Echika took a few laps around the pond, looking around in hopes of finding something that might help with the investigation. Of course, forensics would have unearthed anything she could discover by sight by now, but she couldn't discount the possibility of them overlooking something.

Why had Nicolai left his house in the middle of the night to begin with? If there was anything serious, he'd have told his mother, Elena. Up until now, the Nightmare murder victims had all come to the killer. That would suggest Nicolai was coerced by the killer to come here.

But he was a relative of one of the victims, and he would have been familiar with the killer's methods. If he was startled enough to bolt out of the house, he must have been terribly shaken by whatever he was told.

But just as Echika was agonizing over the possibilities—

<Audio call from a public pay phone>

A public pay phone?

Echika froze in confusion. Suddenly, she thought back to Abayev's copycat

crime, where he'd called the city police from a pay phone. But Abayev couldn't have been on the other end of the line now.

After a moment's hesitation, Echika accepted the call.

"Yes?"

She could tell her voice came across as terribly cautious.

"Hello?" The familiar voice of a girl reached her ears. **"Oh, thank goodness, you picked up."**

"...Bigga?"

How anticlimactic. Echika had seen Bigga just that morning at the intersection. She mentioned that she'd be at the academy today. But the academy was located in Saint Petersburg, where there weren't any public phones around. And yet—

"Wait. Where are you right now? Are you taking the day off from training?"

"I'm sorry. I just realized something about the Nightmare incident," Bigga said, seemingly preparing herself. She hadn't looked into it on her own, had she? **"I'm calling from a technologically restricted zone right now. I actually might have found a clue connecting to the killer."**

It took Echika a moment to confirm she'd heard Bigga right. Had she really just said that?

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll explain later, I didn't bring enough coins, so the call's about to drop." Right, pay phones required that you feed them coins at set intervals to continue your call. What a prehistoric system. **"Anyway, I want you to see something. I'll head back now, so could you come meet me?"**

"Fine. I'll get permission from Assistant Inspector Napolov—"

"I already got permission!" Bigga cut her off vigorously. **"I tried to call Harold first, and I spoke to the assistant inspector then. He said he'll delegate you to check on this."**

Napolov must have done that, accounting for the possibility that Bigga's

information could be mistaken. If he were to focus too much on a clue that ended up being off the mark, it could end up costing Nicolai's life.

"All right." Echika nodded. Neither of them had contacted Echika about this, but they didn't have time to sweat the little details now. "I'll head over right away. Where do we meet up?"

"Thank you. Um, how about—?"

Bigga's call dropped, and Echika opened her map to find the designated meetup spot. It was a small parking lot in Saint Petersburg's Neva district. It was an hour's drive away, so she'd be late to return.

For the time being, she sent Harold a message via the Your Forma. Then she made her way back to the Niva. If this was a useful clue, she would have to call him over. Doing that would be the right thing to do, of course, but...

She wanted to find the culprit before Harold did, if possible.

Echika got into the Niva and switched the engine on, praying all the while. Hopefully, Bigga's lead would prove useful.

3

Harold read the last message he'd gotten from Echika over and over.

<I'll be a little late. I'll call you back later>

Harold gazed at the holo-browser from the passenger seat. He'd gotten the message eight hours ago. He gritted his teeth, glancing out at the nighttime view sailing past the window. His fluid had stopped circulating for a while now.

After Echika left, he'd walked around the house in the hopes of finding a clue Nicolai could have left behind. Unsurprisingly, he came up empty-handed, so he took Napolov's car to the pond to link up with Echika. But Echika was nowhere to be found, and the only thing he had to go on was that message. He waited and waited, but no follow-up arrived, and Echika never returned.

It took him until sunset to realize what had happened.

"About Investigator Hieda's locational data," Napolov said grimly from the driver's seat. "We have her last confirmed position. It was lost in a parking lot in

the Neva district.”

“Let’s hurry over.”

His processing speed felt heavy—that was the only way to describe the sense of urgency that stabbed into his thought core. Since the police didn’t know where Echika was, either, it was safe to assume that the culprit had lured her somewhere, just like he had with Nicolai.

Up until now, the killer had never abducted a second person before one of the bodies of their victims had been discovered. A change in the pattern at this point was unsettling—but even so, Harold felt like he could have predicted this. It shook him to his core. And on top of that, the murderer had abducted Echika...another person involved with the police. Disposing of the copycat killer to state he was “genuine” hadn’t been enough. Was he trying to outdo his past achievements?

No.

“If you find any hints, please let me know.”

“...All right. I’ll let you know, I promise.”

Echika had looked away as she said this before they parted ways. This proved she was still opposed to Harold being involved in the investigation. Harold knew this, but allowed her to get involved despite that. His emotional engine was full of doubts after hearing of Nicolai’s disappearance, and he’d made his decision based on those misgivings.

Because he wanted Echika by his side for some reason.

But...

Harold gripped the wearable terminal on his wrist so hard it creaked. It felt like his mind was on fire.

“I should have kept pushing her away,” he said, full of irrepressible regret. “If the killer was going to target her, then better that she didn’t come with me here.”

“If that bastard had his sights on Investigator Hieda, then it doesn’t matter where she was,” Napolov said calmly. Though maybe he only seemed that way

because Harold was shaken. "I didn't think he'd be stupid enough to go after another officer..."

If...if the two of them end up meeting the same gruesome fate Sozon did...I'll truly lose my mind this time.

It was nearly nine in the evening when they arrived at the parking lot in the Neva district. The city police's forensics unit had arrived ahead of them and set up holo-tape. It was a small parking lot with room for eight or nine cars at best. The forensics officers were investigating the broken security cameras.

According to the maps, there were a few parking lots in the area, but this one got little traffic and was relatively out of sight because of its location. The killer must have scoped the place out.

Napolov parked his car at the end of the row of police vehicles that were stopped at the shoulder of the road. He got out and immediately spotted a Volvo belonging to the Electrocime Investigations Bureau at the top of the line. Outside the vehicle, Investigator Fokine and Bigga were speaking to each other.

"I let Chief Totoki know about the situation," Napolov said, shutting the door. "She said she'd send over support. That must be them."

"Harold!" Bigga spotted them and hurried over.

She was trembling, but surely not because of the cold. She clutched the hem of his coat with her small hands in fear.

"Thank you for coming, Bigga."

"Investigator Fokine got a call from Chief Totoki... I happened to be with him, so I came along," she said, the words spilling out of her mouth. "The city police are investigating the scene. They didn't find anything this time, either... We don't know where Echika is."

"The security drones in the area didn't spot any cars that look like they might belong to the kidnapper." Fokine walked over to them. "Weren't you with Hieda, Aide Lucraft?"

"I'm afraid not. I was careless enough to take my eyes off of her."

"No, that's not what I meant." Fokine awkwardly placed a hand on the nape

of his neck. He probably hadn't intended to fault him. "Sorry, I guess I'm shaken up, too."

"Anyone would be, given the situation."

"Come with me, Harold." Napolov gestured for him to come over.

He walked over the tape and into the parking lot. Harold excused himself to Fokine and Bigga and hurried after him.

He had to stay calm for now.

The killer had called Echika from Peterhof to come to the Neva district. It should have taken her an hour of transit to get there, during which she didn't contact the police to update them. Even the message she sent Harold didn't mention anything—had the culprit coerced Echika, like the other victims?

He needed to figure that out. If he couldn't do that, then what had he developed his discerning eye for?

Napolov waited near the Lada Niva. It greeted Harold in a melancholy manner, its round headlights turned off. One of the forensics officers was checking the fuselage.

"Does Szubin have the day off today?" Harold asked.

"Unfortunately, yes." Napolov nodded. "Give him the spare key. We want to investigate the Niva's interior."

Harold did as he was asked and tossed his spare key to the Niva over to the forensics officer. He spotted Napolov turn around behind him and did the same. A large group of ant-like mill robots were surrounding one spot on the ground, and another forensics officer was kneeling next to them, collecting what the mill robots gathered from their bodies. Harold zoomed in his optical device to look closer, and then felt the pump in his left breast seize up.

It was blood.

Not a large amount by any means, but the stain on the ground did seem unnaturally elongated.

"Is it the murderer's?" Napolov asked.

“We don’t know yet,” the forensics officer replied. “I’ll analyze it.”

They dripped the blood sample into an analyzer hanging from their neck. It accessed the data center’s database via online connection. Within a few dozen seconds, the scan finished and displayed the analysis results.

“It’s Electronic Investigator Echika Hieda’s blood.”

Harold’s field of vision shook for a moment. His system strain skyrocketed.

“Was she hurt?”

“Yes, she probably resisted the kidnapper. The smear is mostly blurred out of shape, but the part that’s just barely visible resembles blood that has dripped from a wound. Other splatters look like they fell horizontally from a wound. On top of that”—the forensics officers pointed at the Niva—“there was an Electrocime Investigations Bureau Flamma 15 handgun lying over the splatters. In other words, the investigator tried to resist the killer, got into a scuffle, dropped her gun, and received a knife wound.”

“Was it a fatal injury?”

“No. The mill robots’ analysis suggests it was a defensive wound... Namely, bleeding from the palm.”

As he listened in on their exchange, Harold gradually regained his composure. He looked down at the bloodstain on the ground—it was hard to see it over the mill robots gathered over it, but it did seem to be stretched across the uneven surface of the asphalt. It was probably stepped on during the struggle and smeared over unnaturally.

No.

Harold used the tip of his shoe to push the mill robots out of the way. The small, silicon-bodied machines skittered away in a panic. Staring at the ground was enough to convince him. This bloodstain hadn’t been smeared randomly.

“Hey.” The forensics officer noticed the mill robots skittering away and called out in complaint. “What are you doing? You’re getting in the way.”

“Assistant Inspector Napolov,” Harold called out, ignoring the officer’s objection. “This isn’t just a bloodstain. This is a *message written in blood*.”

Napolov and the officer exchanged puzzled glances.

“That can’t be true.” The officer shook his head. “The mill robots didn’t detect a message.”

“That smear doesn’t look like letters to me...” Napolov nodded.

“Yes, because it’s incomplete. She was taken away before she finished it.”

Harold bent at the knees, ignoring the pair’s skeptical gazes. He adjusted his optical device’s brightness settings and carefully examined the bloodstain. It was clear that it had been smudged with a fingertip, and it trailed off halfway through. It resembled letters of the alphabet, but he couldn’t tell if one of them was a “J,” a “V,” or perhaps an “I.” But whichever it was, Echika surely wouldn’t have tried to convey anything by leaving a single letter on the ground. The message must have had some significance.

If this was the culprit’s handiwork, he would have finished the message like he had in Napolov’s apartment. Echika had to have written it, but she was taken away before she could finish.

What was she trying to express? She must have left this message knowing that the investigation team would come here after she’d been abducted—more specifically, she’d left it for Harold.

But a message in blood was a gruesome idea, not something Echika would usually come up with. Perhaps she’d been inspired by the message left in Abayev’s apartment.

“Assistant Inspector, did you figure anything out?”

“Don’t overwork Harold, please!”

He heard footsteps approaching. Apparently, Bigga and Fokine had gotten permission to enter the parking lot itself, but Harold shut out their voices.

Think. You need to find Echika and Nicolai. What would drive Echika to do this? To say that her kidnapper was the Nightmare of Petersburg killer? That’s possible, but the murderer would be the first person we would suspect if she went missing. Even if she was panicking, would Echika just try to state the obvious? I must be overlooking something...anything...

“Remember, ‘Don’t just see; observe.’ Try approaching things from every possible angle to build a theory.”

Sozon’s voice replayed in his ears.

His voice.

It can’t be.

For a second, heat ran through him, like severed circuits linked together. Right. That would explain everything.

Harold suddenly got to his feet.

“What?” Napolov called out to him. “What is it this time—?”

“It’s ‘voice.’” Harold turned around in excitement. “Echika didn’t write a message in blood to express anything direct. She did it to point to Abayev’s murder scene... Or rather, to remind us of the tablet.”

Right. The tablet that had Sozon’s digital clone installed on it.

“Abayev used Sozon’s digital clone to call the city police. In other words...”

Napolov, the forensics officers, Bigga, and Fokine all stared at Harold.

“The Nightmare killer falsifies his voice to lure in his victims.”

If a close friend or relative called someone and urged them to “come over right away,” most people would do as they asked without a second thought. This was the only thing that could have lured Echika and Sozon into the murderer’s clutches without raising their suspicions.

This explained why Abayev had opened his front door to the killer without a second thought.

“So our assumption that the perpetrator was one of Abayev’s acquaintances was completely off,” Harold appended, satisfied with his theory. “When he showed himself to me in the past, he’d used a store-bought voice changer. But what if it didn’t stop there? What if he had other people’s voice data that he

used to impersonate the victims' friends and family?"

A stunned silence hung over the place. Somewhere in the distance, they could hear another forensics officer bark instructions.

"So you're saying...", Napolov eventually managed to get out. "That the killer is using digital clones?"

"It takes three weeks to produce a single digital clone. Given the interval between the crimes, that doesn't seem realistic," Harold said, still mulling things over. "If I were the killer, I'd resort to an easier method..."

"Like what?" Fokine asked. "The only other possibility I can think of is using an illegal, custom-made supplier to install people's voice data into Amicus."

"But I can't imagine an Amicus would agree to impersonate a person over the phone."

"No, there's another way," Bigga said gravely. "An easier way."

She clasped her hands together, and her green eyes glinted. Her lips trembled resolutely.

"Bio-hacking," she said clearly. "Bio-hackers can surgically alter someone's voice. If the killer had a voice modifier installed in him that read other people's voice data and let him use it..."

I hadn't thought of that.

It was as though something that had been buried in the dark for the last two and a half years had been exhumed all at once. Harold felt like he'd come closer to the killer than ever before.

"Bigga."

He called out to her, and she nodded intently, her braids dancing elegantly through the air.

"I know a bio-hacker who deals in voice modifiers in the Saint Petersburg area. Maybe we can use their client list to figure out who the killer is!"

It was a two-hour drive from Saint Petersburg to Novgorod, where the bio-hacker operated. The city center was a fortress town, and the remains of its old earthen ramparts were still intact. The Kremlin drew major tourist attention to the city, allowing it to prosper, but part of it had been designated a technologically restricted zone, to protect the scenery from MR ads. It was similar to the Cotswolds in that regard.

Bigga led Harold to a vehicle supply store located in the technologically restricted zone.

“This is just a front,” she explained. “The owner can’t exactly openly state they’re a bio-hacker, after all.”

Harold gazed at the “vehicle supply store” that seemed to meld into the night. Several old cars were parked on the exposed soil of its premises, and light was leaking out from a prefabricated structure that seemed to have been made using 3D printing. The gate at the entrance was hanging open, and a slanted light pole flickered feebly on and off.

“I’m surprised they have a store at all. And this close to the metropolitan area, at that.”

“Bio-hacking is pretty lucrative, so some people set up shop in big cities. And if you’re in a technologically restricted zone, it’s hard for people to tell if you’re a luddite.”

“Have you met this particular bio-hacker before?”

“Just once. Anyway, let’s hurry!”

Bigga sprinted into the prefabricated structure. Harold followed and checked his wearable terminal. He got a brief report from Napolov. It must have gone through before they’d entered the technologically restricted zone.

Investigator Fokine joined up with the assistant inspector, who was currently commanding the city police’s search unit. They were investigating digital clone-related issues, just to be on the safe side, but their efforts bore no fruit.

It was already past midnight. Bigga reached for the door, but it was locked. She courageously knocked on the door, and an annoyed, middle-aged Slavic man showed up a few moments later.

“Sorry, but we’re closed,” he said.

“It’s me, Bigga!” she insisted vigorously, nearly pitching forward. “Danel’s daughter. You remember, a colleague came here for parts once—”

“Doesn’t ring a bell. Come tomorrow during work hours.”

The man stubbornly attempted to close the door, but Harold quickly stuck out his foot to stop it with his shoe. As the man turned to look at him in surprise, Harold flashed his branch ID badge.

“We’re with the police. We apologize for coming at so late an hour,” Harold said, keeping his eyes trained on the shopkeeper the whole time. His pupils were clearly contracted. He looked altogether suspicious, but given his profession as a bio-hacker, this was a given. “We’ll overlook your illicit dealings if you help our investigation.”

“Where do you get off acting like you’re a big deal, you Amicus—?”

“Or we’ll call the police on you!” Bigga said, raising her brows exaggeratedly. “And if that happens, you’ll have to answer all our questions, even things we wouldn’t otherwise ask you, and you’d get arrested!”

“*Tch*. Shit, what’s going on here...?”

The man seemed to have realized there was no weaseling his way out of this. Resigned to his fate, he let Harold and Bigga into the prefabricated house. The interior looked like a warehouse. Steel racks were lined with countless storage boxes. A few boxes couldn’t fit on the shelves and littered the floor. One part was separated with a partition, forming a makeshift “operating room.” The scent of an old oilstove choked the air.

“Do you still deal in voice modifiers?” Bigga asked the man.

“I do, but they’re not particularly sought after. It’s been over a year since I last sold one.”

“That’s fine by us.” Harold extended a hand. “Could you show us your client list?”

“They’re all fake names,” the man said bitterly, pushing a bundle of papers tied together with twine into Harold’s chest. “Look at what you need to and get

the hell out of my store.”

Even if all the names were aliases, they could indicate a killer’s personality and tendencies. Harold quickly flipped through the client list.

“So when did you decide to cooperate with the cops?” The man glared at Bigga. “Having spies like you working with them makes work harder for the rest of us, you know. You’re a real headache.”

“I’m not a spy. I’m an official consultant.”

The bio-hacker’s list included client names and genders, the operations they’d requested, and the date. Harold immediately went back to the dates two and a half years ago, around the time the Nightmare of Petersburg murders started, and looked for clients who requested voice modifiers. It really wasn’t a popular product; he hardly found any people who asked for this operation. He finally found a client who asked for one, but it was a woman, so that couldn’t have been right. He flipped over to the next page.

“How’s it going, Harold?” Bigga asked.

“Give me a little longer.”

Harold scanned the list up and down, when his eyes finally settled on the words “voice modifier” again. The client was male, and the date for the operation was exactly one week before the Nightmare of Petersburg murders had begun.

His name, “Montmartre,” was spelled out in messy handwriting.

“Montmartre,” Bigga said, peeking into the list from Harold’s side. “There’s a Montmartre district in Paris’s eighteenth arrondissement, right? It’s where Picasso and Dalí used to live...”

Harold recalled that Bigga was knowledgeable about fine art. Back when they’d first met, they’d gone to the Hermitage Museum, where Bigga showed off the knowledge in that area she’d gained from reading books.

And the bloody message written during Abayev’s murder had been written with a paintbrush.

“Tells left on the crime scene indicate the killer may have had an interest in

art,” Harold said, opening his holo-browser.

He tried looking up information on Montmartre, but since this was a technologically restricted zone, he couldn’t connect to the internet.

“It’s a district where artists gathered during the nineteenth century, around the time of the renovation of Paris,” Bigga commentated instead. “The name ‘Montmartre’ is derived from Mont des Martyrs, the hill of the martyr... In other words, Denis of Paris. There’s a statue of him in the Notre-Dame Cathedral.”

“What kind of statue?”

“Hmm, well, it’s like this.” Bigga brought a hand to her chest. *“It holds its head like this.”*

Holding its head?

“Denis of Paris was sentenced to death by decapitation on the hill of Montmartre. It’s said that he picked up his head after the decapitation and walked away, continuing his sermons... The statue depicts that image.”

All the victims of the Nightmare of Petersburg had their heads placed over their torsos. If Sozon’s theory was right, the killer was enacting a fantasy in his head... Unlike the Denis of Paris sculpture, there likely wasn’t any religious significance to this. But if the perpetrator really did have an appreciation for art, it wasn’t unthinkable he’d take inspiration from the statue.

Harold felt his circulatory fluid run warm once again.

This “Montmartre” might be the murderer.

“Pardon me.” Harold turned to the bio-hacker, who was looking at them go about their business out of boredom. “Do you remember a client who came here two and a half years ago by the name of ‘Montmartre’?”

“I can barely remember what I had for lunch yesterday. Two years ago feels like it was before I was even born.”

“Then let us check the records there. It’s not a dummy, is it?”

Harold looked up at a gap in the ceiling. There was a dusty cloth bag stuffed into it, but his optical device detected a small hole in the bag, with a security camera hidden inside it. This was a “crime countermeasure” of sorts—it was

hidden so any guests who were up to any shady business wouldn't notice it.

"Oh, come on, no one's ever spotted it before," the man said, fed up. He really hated having to deal with them. "You're sure you won't report me and will just leave me alone, right?"

"Of course." Bigga raised her voice. "We promise, so please, hurry!"

The man sluggishly brought out a laptop computer with a cable attached to it. As he called up the camera records, Harold was gripped by something close to prayer. His system was full of visions of the worst possible outcome. Images of Echika's and Nicolai's severed heads.

Hurry. Please.

"There's your guy, Montmartre. Oh yeah, come to think of it, I do remember someone like that."

The bio-hacker shoved the laptop into Harold's hands. Harold and Bigga gazed into the monitor smudged with fingerprints—in the footage, a man walked into the prefabricated store. There was a cap hanging over his eyes, so it was hard to make out his features. He was roughly 175 centimeters tall, hunched over, and looked quite unconfident. Though the man was a bit shorter than the shadow in Harold's memory, he probably could have falsified his height with a tall pair of shoes.

The footage had no sound. As Montmartre spoke to the bio-hacker, he glanced nervously around the store—and suddenly, he turned to face the camera. A clear look at his features hidden under the cap.

For a second, Harold forgot his quasi-breathing.

It can't be.

He truly, honestly never suspected this. But if this was true, how had it eluded him so long? His system processing slowed to a crawl. He'd never had any reason to suspect him to begin with.

"Did Montmartre specify why he needed a voice modifier?" Bigga asked, using a tablet she carried with her to snap a picture of the laptop's monitor.

"All my clients would run if I started getting in their business," the bio-hacker

said moodily, placing a cigarette he'd produced from somewhere between his lips. "So you got what you came for? I've got work tomorrow, you know."

"No, wait, we're not d—"

"We have what we need, thank you." Harold cut Bigga off and returned the laptop. "Thanks for your cooperation. We'll be leaving."

Harold left the store, essentially fleeing the place—the operation rate of the circulatory pump in the left side of his chest had skyrocketed. He hurried to the car like a man possessed.

"Harold!" Bigga jogged after him. "Was Montmartre the killer?"

"It's highly likely. Once we get out of the technologically restricted zone, we have to contact Assistant Inspector Napolov right away."

"I got his picture. Send it to Napolov later, please."

But just as Harold was about to get into the Niva, Bigga suddenly grabbed his sleeve. Turning around, he saw her look at him with anxious eyes. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold.

"Um... I'll drive on the way back. You should rest a little."

"I appreciate the offer, but I don't experience fatigue."

"But you need to rest!" Bigga said, trying to pull him away from the driver's seat door. He was touched by her concern, but now wasn't the time for it—and yet her small hands refused to let go of his sleeve, not leaving any room for argument. She practically forced him into the passenger's seat.

Bigga victoriously settled into the driver's seat, adjusted its position, and switched on the engine of the Niva.

"I understand that you're concerned over Miss Hieda, but you'll break down if you stay this stressed."

"Amicus can be repaired if we break."

"You can't fix everything."

Harold furrowed his brows ever so slightly. He couldn't quite understand what she meant. The steering wheel looked bigger than usual in Bigga's small hands.

The Niva rolled away in an awkward, sluggish motion.

“Listen to me. Just close your eyes and try to rest.”

“Bigga, I appreciate the sentiment, but—”

“Just do as I say, please.”

She remained obstinate, leaving Harold with no choice but to close his eyes. She was right that no amount of stress and unease was going to get them to Saint Petersburg any faster.

Montmartre’s face from the footage drifted up in his mind again. Even Sozon, who was with Harold at the time, hadn’t suspected a thing. He couldn’t possibly have suspected anything.

After all, he...the killer *made no readable tells*.

Frustration mingled with the sense of urgency burning through his mind. And before long, they left the technologically restricted zone.

4

Someone was whispering at her from somewhere. *Wake up*, they implored her. *Wake up, wake up*.

Echika barely opened her eyes. Cold concrete pressed against her cheek. She was lying defenselessly on the ground, her hands tied behind her back, and her legs crossed and bound together with rope. She couldn’t stand up in this state.

This sensation was a familiar one. She’d felt it when Aidan Farman abducted her—and as soon as she realized that, panic blared in her mind, dispelling the fog of fatigue.

She tried to use her Your Forma, but to little surprise, a network isolation unit had cut off her internet connection.

This is terrible.

The wound in her palm flared up in pain, as if to remind her of its presence. She thought back to what had transpired. She’d left Peterhof because of Bigga’s phone call and made her way to the parking lot in the Neva region. Bigga was nowhere to be found when she’d arrived, and a masked man grabbed her as

soon as she stepped out of the Niva.

She tried to pull out her gun, but he'd wrestled it from her grasp, resulting in a violent scuffle. The man lost his temper and drew a knife on her, which Echika reflexively tried to grab to defend herself. Ultimately, he cut her palm and forced her to the ground, before he inserted a network isolation unit into her connector port.

At that point, Echika was convinced this was the Nightmare of Petersburg murderer. He'd duped her completely and called her over to him.

Not only had she not helped the search for Nicolai, she'd ended up impeding the investigation.

Echika attempted to write a message in blood to leave a clue for Harold—but she couldn't remember what happened after that. The killer must have knocked her out.

Annoyed, Echika tried moving her head, but a faint pain ran through her neck. The lights were off, but she could make out the contours of a van in the darkness. A large van. There was a shutter lowered in front of its hood—it seemed this was some kind of garage.

"Thank God!" She heard a gasping voice from somewhere in the dark. "Investigator, are you all right?"

There's someone else here?

Echika wiggled her body in the direction of the voice with some difficulty. On the other side of the van, a human silhouette stirred. They seemed to be bound, just like her, and they were lying on the floor helplessly, like a caterpillar. She couldn't see their face, but their physique implied they were a man.

And then, a flash of realization filled her mind. *It couldn't be.*

"Mr. Nicolai?" she asked.

"Yes. I can't believe you're here, too..."

He was alive. For a moment, an inexplicable sense of relief washed over her. Thank goodness, he was still okay. She wanted to relay this to Harold as soon as possible.

“We’ll save you, for sure,” Echika said, shifting her posture to lie on her stomach. She needed to get out of these ropes. “Where’s the killer?”

“He came in, put you here, and left. The car’s still in the garage, so he can’t be too far, though.”

“How long have I been out?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know. I wasn’t in any state to look at the time—”

Just then, they heard a heavy thud. Echika and Nicolai fell silent. Maybe the garage was connected to a house. The shutter shook violently as the wind rattled against it. She could hear the bubbling of water in the distance. This wasn’t the sound of pipes—it was a natural sound. There must have been a river or body of water nearby.

Echika thought back to the map of Saint Petersburg, trying to pinpoint where they could be. But suddenly, the garage door opened. Echika realized there was a door there the whole time. Light slashed through the darkness, and she could hear footsteps, accompanied by the screeching of vinyl. Someone entered the room.

She tensed up, a shiver running down her spine. The kidnapper was here. His face was covered with something, obscuring his features. He was wearing all black and had a transparent raincoat over his clothes.

“S-stay away!” Nicolai shouted fearfully.

But the kidnapper ignored his screams and grabbed Nicolai by the collar. He started dragging him away, taking him out of the garage.

“Wait!” Echika shouted. “Get your hands off of him...!”

The man didn’t listen, though. He pulled Nicolai, who was thrashing to no avail, out of the garage. The door closed with a ruthless slam, and Nicolai’s screaming grew distant and faint.

Oh no.

Echika struggled to free herself. She remembered how the ropes ended up tearing when Farman had held her captive, but she had no such luck this time. Her bonds wouldn’t budge.

This is bad... If I don't do something, Nicolai's going to get killed...

"Shit...!" Echika cursed through her teeth. This was all she could manage.

Nicolai's sharp screams echoed in the distance, until they eventually died down.



"The person behind the Nightmare of Petersburg murders is Kazimir Martinovich Szubin."

As Harold drove away from Novgorod, the holo-window from his wearable terminal lit up the interior of the car. Assistant Inspector Napolov's face was projected onto the window. He was walking through the city police headquarters, Investigator Fokine at his side.

"...What?"

"Szubin from forensics, yes," Harold said sharply. "I'm sure you know him well enough."

Yes, the face they had seen in the bio-hacker's security footage was Szubin's. Though the cap he'd been wearing obscured his features, there was no mistaking the bangs hanging over his eyes, along with his trademark hunch.

"Y-you're joking, right?" Napolov tried to laugh off Harold's accusation, to no avail.

"I'll send a photo over. Bigga took a picture of the security footage."

Harold used the tablet Bigga had given him to send Szubin's photo to Napolov. Napolov got it through his Your Forma and closed his eyes for a few seconds. The revelation clearly enraged him, despite his steadfast efforts to remain composed.

"If you compare the killer's profiling with Szubin's, it fits," Harold said, reflecting on the killer's established image. "He's thirty-five years old, and his personality is far from extroverted. He's not a health care worker, but he's used to handling bodies, since he works in forensics. He's knowledgeable about art, and while he doesn't profess to be a machine denier, he never really displays

any emotions to begin with, so for all we know, he could be harboring a hatred of Amicus.”

What’s more, forensics officers had the ability to make use of the personal data center at their discretion, as all officers involved with investigations were cleared to use their Your Formas to obtain personal information. The very nature of a forensics officer’s job allowed them to skip some of the verification phases required to browse biometric details in the data center.

Szubin could have abused his position’s authority to obtain the voice print data of certain users, which he could use to get a sense of his victims’ personal relationships and masquerade as their friends and families.

“But even forensics officers have limited access to biometric data. He can only obtain the profiles of individuals working on the case, or people with criminal records, regardless of their relevancy.” Harold continued, thinking aloud. “In Echika’s and Sozon’s cases, he drew them out by using the voices of one of their colleagues. As for the other victims, it’s possible they shared something besides being Amicus sympathizers—acquaintances with criminal records.”

“But...” Napolov placed a hand on his forehead, having stopped in his tracks. **“Szubin himself analyzed the bloody message found at the scene of Abayev’s murder. Wouldn’t explaining your own crime be too risky?”**

“It’s the other way around. He spelled out his crime so we wouldn’t suspect he was the killer.”

“I see,” whispered Fokine, who had been listening to the conversation. **“It’s true that fake witnesses who try to get involved in police investigations can turn out to be suspects.”**

“Plus, a large organization like the city police has periodic physical examinations, right?” Bigga interjected, still holding on to the steering wheel. “You should check those. People who go through bio-hacking usually skip out on physical examinations to hide their modifications.”

“...I’ll check Szubin’s personal data.”

Napolov accessed the user database. Moments later, he sent Szubin’s data to Harold’s wearable terminal. It contained his date of birth, birthplace, academic

history...and his medical history, which listed the dates where he'd undergone physical examinations. Indeed, the records showed that Szubin had stopped taking exams two years ago, around when the murders started.

"Does the city police not inspect its employees' ideologies?" Fokine asked.

"We do, but it's not as strict as a psychiatric evaluation," Napolov said, suppressing a great deal of frustration. **"People like Szubin can pass as normal... You can slip through those sorts of tests as long as you have the ability to repress your abnormalities."**

It seemed conclusive at this point.

"Assistant Inspector, please acquire Szubin's locational data."

"...He could be using an isolation unit."

Napolov started the inquiry right away, but it looked like he was still having a hard time believing his long-time subordinate was the murderer. Harold was surprised, too. But now wasn't the time to be paralyzed with shock. Not when Echika's and Nicolai's lives were hanging in the balance.

"He's in a dacha near Lake Ladoga," Napolov eventually said in a feverish, almost delirious sort of way. **"There's a group of dachas built in the area, but people don't tend to stay there during winter. Plenty of vacant houses."**

"So that means...he's using vacant homes to perform his crimes, just like when he killed Sozon?"

"It's very likely. Maybe he thinks that making his killings resemble the original Nightmare murders will get them to stand out."

Whatever the case, I won't let him take away anyone else.

Kazimir Martinovich Szubin. Harold mouthed the name silently.

I finally found you.

"We'll head for the dacha. Harold, you two should link up with us right away."



YOUR FORMA

Chapter 4

Daybreak in the Basement

Chapter 4

Daybreak in the Basement

1

Nicolai's screams had completely died down.

Alone in the garage, Echika rubbed her shoulder against the floor in an attempt to crawl toward the door. She hadn't come up with any brilliant escape plans, but she couldn't simply stay still.

She had to save Nicolai somehow.

Echika heaved herself up, rising unsteadily to her knees in an attempt to lower the door lever with her chin. She tried to push the door open, but it wouldn't budge.

Come on, hurry! She was so tense, her blood vessels seemed like they would burst at any moment.

This time, Echika managed to tumble through the door, banging her jaw hard against the floor. The rusty taste of blood filled her mouth. She looked up and saw a corridor stretching out before her. The garage really did lead into a house. She started crawling ahead with difficulty, dust and dirt rustling noisily under her body.

There were less than three meters between her and the door at the end of the hall, but the distance felt infinitely long. The door was ajar, and she couldn't hear any noise coming from it. Echika all but bashed herself against it to push it open.

She emerged into a living room. Faint moonlight filtered in through the window, lighting the empty space. *This house is abandoned*, she realized.

At the end of the room was the man, his back turned to her and leaning

forward. Nicolai was lying at his feet, limp and with his eyes closed, but still breathing. He was only unconscious. The man had a small but vicious-looking electric saw in his hands. Nicolai's limbs were unbound and sprawled out loosely on the floor.

Did he do that to make it easier to sever his limbs?!

Echika reflexively got up, intent on stopping the killer, but failed to do so in her tied-up state. She stumbled to the floor, and the man turned around at the sound of her fall. His eyes met hers. He slowly rose to his feet, turning his vinyl-covered boots to face her.

What do I do? What can I do?

The man was upon her in the blink of an eye. He grabbed Echika by the collar with his black-gloved hands, dragging her to her feet. She groaned, trying to think of a way out the whole while. Should she bite him, like she had with Farman? No, that wouldn't do much against those thick gloves of his. And she couldn't kick him because her legs were bound.

The man strengthened his grip on the electric saw, his finger hovering over the switch. Every hair on Echika's body stood on end. She couldn't die here.

I...I don't want to die.

But...

All of a sudden, the man let go of Echika's collar.

Huh?

For a moment, her head emptied of thought. The man had placed the electric saw on the floor for some reason. Then he took a few steps back, almost as though he was afraid. Echika could only stare at him in confusion. What happened?

"...Investigator Hieda," he spoke, his voice still identical to Bigga's. "You are a brilliant investigator... So you'll..."

Just then, the moonlight shining on the window took on a dazzling shade of white. The headlights of a car. The man raised his head with a start, and seconds later, Echika heard the sound of car doors opening and people talking. Someone was coming. Was it the man's conspirators? No...

Silence hung in the air. Suddenly, the kidnapper turned on a dime and sprinted to the back of the room toward the garage.

"Wait!" Echika could only stir. "Where are you—?"

But the next moment, the thundering sound of footsteps burst into the room.

"Clear! We found both of them, get an ambulance here quickly!"

Echika managed to raise her neck. She was greeted by the sight of Assistant Inspector Napolov, wearing a scarf and clutching a revolver. He hurried over to her cautiously. Echika felt the warmth of relief wash over her.

They'd made it.

The question of how they'd found this place crossed her mind for a moment, but she soon realized that was stupid to ask. She'd left that message in blood hoping they would find her... And she believed Harold would figure it out correctly. But it had been a desperate move...

"The garage in the back!"

"He's getting away in a car! Cut off his escape route!"

Two officers in bulletproof vests hurried past them.

"Are you all right, Investigator?" Napolov immediately untied her. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Forget about me, it's Nicolai who...," Echika said, pulling out the network isolation unit from the back of her neck.

She turned to look at Nicolai. An ambulance crew who'd entered the room was scanning him with an on-site diagnosis AI. For now, all she could do was hope he was unharmed.

"Assistant Inspector," Echika said. "If you found this place, does that mean you know who the killer is?"

“Yes, we figured it out,” Napolov replied, his expression bitter. “Szubin was responsible for everything.”

It took her a moment to process this. Szubin, that sullen forensics officer? She compared his appearance with the man she’d seen just a minute ago. Come to think of it, he did match the killer’s estimated profile... But she was still surprised.

“Miss Hieda!”

A petite girl bolted into the room, cutting off Echika’s thoughts—Bigga. She hurried over to her, looking like she might burst into tears at any second.

“How?” Echika got to her feet somehow, still staggering. “How did you know he took us here?”

“I joined the investigation and thought the murderer might be using a bio-hacked voice modifier... No, it doesn’t matter!” Her eyes were red, and she brought her slender arms around Echika in a hug. “You’re alive! Thank goodness, you’re alive...!”

Her warmth filled Echika with relief, but now wasn’t the time.

“It’s dangerous here.” She gently pulled Bigga away. “The killer’s still in the back. We have to get outside—”

“Don’t worry, the police will catch him. Investigator Fokine is here, too, so you should hurry to the hospital... Ah, your palm is injured!”

Bigga grabbed Echika’s left hand, and all the color drained from her face, but that was the least of Echika’s concerns right now. She looked around and saw rescue workers everywhere. Napolov put on a pair of gloves and picked up the electric saw Szubin had left behind. She could hear the shouting of officers coming from somewhere in the distance.

But Harold was nowhere to be found.

Normally, he’d be so quick to come to her side that it was almost irritating.

“Where’s Aide Lucraft?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, he’s outside,” Bigga soothed her. “We all set up a net around the house with our cars to stop Szubin from getting away...”

Oh no. Echika felt panic build up in her.

“We have to keep him away from Szubin.”

“Huh?”

“Get him back to the house, hurry. We can’t let him get away from the scene, or—”

But then she heard a blast in the distance that shook the pit of her stomach.

It came from outside.

Echika shook free of Bigga and hurried out of the room. Springing down the hall, she pushed past the security Amicus blocking the entrance and stepped outside, only to find a black sea stretching across the horizon. No, that wasn’t a sea...

<Lake Ladoga>

A midnight-colored lake that reflected no stars. This must have been the source of the water she heard earlier. She’d been in one of the dachas by the lakeside. There was a plot of exposed sandy soil in front of the house. Just then, Szubin’s van burst out through the lowered shutters of the garage. Two police cars lying in wait moved in to block his path, but Szubin managed to weave between them to just barely slip through. The police cars ended up crashing together, making an earsplitting crunch.

You’ve got to be kidding.

The van accelerated and burst through the wooden fence around the dacha. The mostly rotten wood tore apart easily, tumbling over the van’s uneven fuselage and onto the road. But then another car lying in wait sprang to life, its headlights turning on. A familiar maroon SUV sped after the escaping van in dogged pursuit.

The Lada Niva.

“Aide Lucraft!” Echika called out.

For a moment, she thought she saw the Niva slow down. But Echika’s voice failed to reach it—both vehicles’ headlights disappeared from view in a matter of seconds. They overlapped, vanishing into the winding road.

The shadowy trees around them swayed, their leaves rustling in a mocking fit of laughter.

I couldn't stop him.

The thought alone made her legs lock. What was she going to do?

“Assistant Inspector Napolov, I’ll go after Aide Lucraft!”

Echika jolted with a start. A Volvo parked on the premises lowered its window, revealing Investigator Fokine in the driver’s seat. Echika turned around and spotted Napolov coming out of the house.

“I’ll head over right away!” he shouted back.

Fokine gestured in understanding, and the Volvo took off.

“Assistant Inspector,” Echika said, feeling compelled to ask. “Is Aide Lucraft alone in the Niva?”

“Yes. But he’s bound by his Laws of Respect. He can’t arrest the killer even if he catches up to him.”

“I’ll come along. If you’re going after Aide Lucraft, let me come with you.”

“You can’t!” Bigga, having caught up with her, grabbed Echika’s arm from behind. “You have to let a hospital check up on you! Even if that cut is just on your palm, it’s very deep!”

“I’m fine. The bleeding’s stopped,” Echika protested. She couldn’t let Harold get to Szubin alone.

It dawned on her that she was meddling in something that wasn’t her business—she’d seen with her own two eyes what Harold had lived through after losing Sozon. When she’d Dived into Elena’s memories, she could feel the pain of her loss as if it were her own, anger and sorrow so intense they could take your breath away.

Harold had good cause to seek revenge, and she had no right to get in his way. The mantra she’d repeated so many times already played like a chorus in her head.

And yet she still couldn’t sit back and watch this happen. So what if she was

meddling? All she knew was that she needed to stop this. She couldn't let Harold shoulder any more pain.

"You're right that we need every bit of help we can get," Napolov said, turning to look at the crashed police cars, where the rescue workers were extracting the injured officers from the wreckage. "Investigator, do you have a weapon?"

Echika reached for the holster at her leg, only to realize her pistol was missing. She remembered dropping it in the parking lot when she was grappling with Szubin. But then, Bigga took something out of her shoulder bag and handed it to Echika.

An automatic Flamma 15 pistol, set inside its leather case.

"The forensics officers left it with me and asked me to return it to you." Bigga said reluctantly, lowering her gaze. "I really do want you to go to the hospital, but..."

"Thank you, Bigga."

Echika gratefully accepted the firearm and took it out of its case. After checking its cylinder, she put it into her holster. She turned to Bigga, and the girl nodded back in concern. Echika did feel bad about worrying her, but there were more important things than her wound right now.

"Bigga, you stay with Nicolai, okay?" Napolov instructed her and walked off with quick steps.

Echika hurried after him. Napolov led her to an undamaged police car he'd driven here.

For the time being, they had to catch up to Harold quickly. Echika slid into the passenger seat, and Napolov entered the driver's seat. The motor roared to life as he pulled the seatbelt over his chest. They left the lake grounds behind and got onto the highway, Bigga disappearing from view before long.

"But how do you know it's Szubin?" Echika asked, somehow calming her nerves.

"Harold and Bigga figured out the killer was altering his voice with a modifier.

They found footage of Szubin's face in the security footage of a bio-hacker's store." Napolov tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "I've known him for years and never realized. He sure pulled one over on us."

"I was shocked, too." But it appeared they already had evidence lined up to prove it. "Szubin tried to kill me, but it seemed like he changed his mind halfway through. And he left Nicolai untied..."

As she said this, Echika started to reflect on how strange he'd acted. Had he stopped halfway through because he realized pursuers were hot on his heels? But Szubin had an isolation unit on, so he should have been confident his position wouldn't be discovered immediately.

No, hold on.

Echika thought back to what happened.

There hadn't been anything plugged into the back of Szubin's neck.

"Szubin always wore an isolation unit during prior kills, but not this time." And he had to have known they'd be able to track his position without it. "He tried to tell me something right before you arrived—"

Pure darkness spread over the windshield. Napolov heaved a sigh.

"...I think I know where he went. Let's capture him and hear what he has to say."

Echika and Napolov drove away from Lake Ladoga for roughly an hour, eventually arriving at a residential district along the Okhta River. They stopped at a group of dilapidated, vacant buildings that had been constructed in the middle of an abandoned field. Desolate agricultural land spanned as far as the eye could see.

According to Echika's Your Forma, this had once been a prosperous exurban area occupied by many farmers. But in the wake of the pandemic, phytotron cultivation facilities manned by drones and Amicus became the mainstream source of agriculture, so the region lost all of its economic activity. Now only deserted, dilapidated homes remained.

Napolov parked the car in front of one civilian home. It was hard to discern the color of its roof under the dark sky, but it did look very old and rotten. The faint murmur of the Okhta River behind it was the only thing about the scene with any vitality.

“Where are we?” Echika asked, undoing the seatbelt.

“The abandoned house where Sozon was murdered. If Szubin wanted to surpass his past crimes, he would have eventually brought you and Nicolai here.”

Napolov got out of the car first. Echika exited the vehicle and looked up old news articles about the Nightmare of Petersburg in her *Your Forma*. She found a few hits of stories that touched on the exact locations of the murders. One did mention that Sozon was killed in an abandoned home set in an urban agricultural area.

But when Echika looked around, she noticed Szubin’s van was nowhere in sight. Neither was Harold’s Niva, of course.

“But it looks like Szubin didn’t come here.”

“He’ll be here, no doubt about it. His GPS data shows he’s heading here as we speak,” the assistant inspector said in a feverish tone. “Let’s ambush him.”

With that, Napolov walked toward the abandoned house. He had to be getting Szubin’s whereabouts from the personal data center, but he wasn’t sharing the transmission with Echika. For the time being, she followed Napolov, checking her gun’s condition. She needed to be able to capture Szubin as soon as he showed up—to ensure Harold wouldn’t lay a finger on him once he arrived, hot on his heels.

The aging entrance to the abandoned residence didn’t even have holo-tape across it, but rather anachronistic paper caution tape glued over it. Napolov tore the tape, which flapped in the wind, and threw it away. The door fit poorly on its hinges and wouldn’t open properly, so he forced it open. It was locked—presumably for peace of mind’s sake more than anything else—but a strong push was all it took to dislodge it.

They entered the house. Echika grimaced as the smell of mold hit her. The

place was in terrible condition. Napolov walked down the corridor and entered the area behind the stairs. There he raised a floorboard, revealing a hatch that descended into darkness. He unflinchingly descended into the basement.

“Assistant Inspector?” Echika hesitated. “If we want to ambush Szubin, we could do it here...”

But Napolov didn’t seem to hear her, and he disappeared into the cellar. Echika turned around, glancing at the front door. She strained her ears, but she couldn’t hear the sound of a car motor. After a moment’s thought, she descended through the hatch, too. The thin stairway leading into the cellar was moist and half-decayed. With each step, the wood creaked ominously under her boots.

Napolov was waiting for her at the bottom.

“This is the basement where Sozon was killed,” he said, turning his eyes toward the hollow darkness.

The place was oddly suffocating. The farm equipment littering the floor had been reduced to scrap metal. Specks of faint light filtered in through the gaps in the floorboards, and the exposed soil floor was dotted with black stains.

Bloodstains.

Chills surged through her body the moment she realized she was looking at the marks of the tragedy from two years ago.

“I mean, the whole time he was confined, the killer kept telling him, ‘You’re an Amicus, so even if I hack your master into bits, you won’t feel anything.’”

The story she’d heard from Darya at some point replayed in her ears. Harold had been right here that day.

“You don’t have a heart, everything about you is phony.”

Harold’s whole world fell apart after Sozon’s murder. And there was no collecting the pieces and trying to put them back together exactly as they had been before—that simply wasn’t how wounds worked. Echika knew that very well. Though her case was very different, she’d experienced the same in her relationship with her father.

Once something struck a crater into your heart, the marks of that damage lingered. All she'd been able to do was focus on the new days ahead of her, hoping they could cover up that deficit little by little. But an Amicus like Harold couldn't do that.

Harold could never forget.

"If I ever catch Sozon's killer, I intend to judge him by my own hand."

But despite that, if she ran into him as he pursued Szubin, she would—

Suddenly, she was struck by a powerful blow to the cheek.



The needle of the Niva's speedometer had continued its upward climb for quite some time. Night hung silent and heavy over the deciduous forest near Lake Ladoga. The road cutting through the forest was devoid of other vehicles, and there were no traffic lights or buildings in sight.

The headlights of the Niva tore through the darkness as Harold continued tailing Szubin's van. There was a mere thirty-meter gap between them, and the other car was fully visible. But whenever Harold closed the distance, Szubin pulled away. He couldn't catch up to him.

Harold tried to curtail the impatience spewing from his emotional intelligence engine. He wouldn't let Szubin get away, no matter what. But suddenly, his wearable terminal rang out. It was a call from Investigator Fokine. Harold chose to ignore the call and tightened his grip on the steering wheel, concluding he couldn't let his concentration slip now.

He hadn't seen Nicolai, but he'd confirmed Echika was fine. He'd seen her storm out of the house as he was driving away. He'd zoomed in on her with his optical device and seen that she didn't have any visible injuries. Just glimpsing her for a half-second had been enough to put him at ease. Echika had hurried over and tried to tell him something, but he was too focused on pursuing Szubin.

The van ahead of Harold suddenly changed course. The abrupt swerve left him stunned for a moment. The van veered off the road into a small path cutting through the forest. This was a bad idea. At this late an hour, the road was no better than an unpaved trail. Going there was an act of insanity.

Harold's system coldly warned him that letting Szubin intentionally crash his car would be a bad idea. Should he give up on the chase?

No. If I let this opportunity slip me by, I'll never get another chance to catch him.

He turned the Niva in unflinching pursuit. Low-hanging branches grazed against the windshield, slowing him down. Nevertheless, it didn't take long before he saw the van's taillights ahead of him. Szubin was driving unsteadily on the uneven road. Human eyes were useless in the dark, and Harold imagined that Szubin could barely make out the road ahead of him at this speed.

With only a dozen or so meters between them, the van once again veered off the trail. Szubin hurriedly turned the steering wheel, but that was where his luck ran out. The van's fuselage lurched, and it slammed into a tree.

There was a deafening collision.

The earsplitting sound shook the Niva's interior even through its closed windows. The tree bent unnaturally as the van crashed into it, and the birds slumbering atop it all flew off at once. The night sky was dyed black.

Silence settled over the woods.

Harold had thought things might play out like this. He slowly pulled the Niva over and observed the van for thirty seconds or so, but there was no sign of movement. According to Harold's calculations, the probability of Szubin surviving this crash was high. Still, it would have been a cruel joke if he'd gotten himself killed.

Harold got out of the Niva, leaving the engine on. Colorless fallen leaves covered the ground. Harold closed the door and walked out, the leaves crunching loudly under his shoes.

He approached the van. Something he couldn't put into words ran through his circulatory fluid. His emotional engine had been in overdrive this whole time.

The hood of the van was dented and buried into the trunk of the tree.

Harold peered into the driver's seat and found Szubin pressed between the steering wheel and the seat. The airbag had worked, but it was mostly good for peace of mind. Harold reached for the door. It seemed Szubin had neglected to lock it in his hurry, so it opened effortlessly.

Szubin's face was uncovered. He was still in his transparent raincoat, but he'd needed to tear off the mask to see the road clearly. Warm blood was dripping from his forehead; it must have gotten cut during the crash.

This is the man who killed Sozon. The man who tore my happiness to bits. I've finally found him. I've finally...

Harold grabbed Szubin by the collar. He pulled his body, which was pressed into the vehicle, out of the van. He let Szubin's own weight pull him down, and the man slammed him into the ground.

Never before had Harold wished he were a normal Amicus. How many times had he reminded himself that he needed to adhere to his Laws of Respect?

I'm manhandling a human being right now.

Suddenly, a sense of reluctance sprouted in him like a memory surfacing. He was about to do to Szubin what Szubin had done to Sozon. The action was a major contradiction, unproductive and irrational...

And yet.

An Amicus's memory never faded. For the past two and a half years, Harold had been haunted by the things this man had done to Sozon, and he remembered them down to every last detail. Sozon's every moan, the thud of his limbs hitting the ground, the way the blood splattered, the scents, the shadowy back of the killer—all of it, perfectly preserved in his memory.

But above all else, he could never forget the utter despair of having failed to save Sozon.

Harold needed to prove it. Prove that he wasn't "useless" like he had been back then.

"D-don't..." Szubin had slightly regained consciousness, and he turned his

dazed eyes on Harold. “I...”

“I’ve been looking for you for a long, long time. I never knew you were so close by all along.”

Szubin said nothing. His pupils were already losing focus again.

Even if he is unconscious, he’ll come to if he feels pain.

Harold reached out to grab Szubin by the collar. But then flickering headlights shone in their direction, cutting through the gloom. He could hear the grinding of tires and the growling of a car motor. Someone had shown up to get in his way sooner than expected. Masking his annoyance, Harold stepped away from Szubin.

An Electrocrime Investigations Bureau vehicle appeared on the trail. The side brakes screeched as a figure stepped out of the driver’s seat.

“Aide Lucraft!” Investigator Fokine called out. “Where’s Szubin?!”

If only you’d shown up ten minutes later.

“As you can see, he got himself into a car accident,” Harold replied calmly. *“I somehow managed to drag him out of the vehicle, but his wounds are severe. He might have suffered some brain damage.”*

Fokine walked over swiftly, his eyes moving between the crashed van and Szubin.

“I’ll call an ambulance.” He pressed a hand against his temple as a severe expression came to his face. “You get in touch with Assistant Inspector Napolov and send him Szubin’s current coordinates. He should be heading this way, too.”

“Understood.”

Harold obediently operated his wearable terminal. Aaah, at this rate, the chance he’d been waiting for was going to slip away. What should he do? With that thought in mind, he sent Napolov the message as instructed—but instead of receiving the “message sent” tune, he got an error report.

<Error code D00898: This user is outside broadcast range. Cannot send the message>

Harold felt a chill run through him. There weren't any technologically restricted zones anywhere near here. Was Napolov wearing a network isolation unit? For a moment, the possibility that the killer might have abducted the assistant inspector crossed his mind, but that couldn't be—the murderer was lying unconscious before his eyes.

Harold looked down at Szubin's face. His eyes were just barely open, and he was breathing heavily, but he was already effectively unconscious. Come to think of it, Echika had been unharmed when she bolted out of the house earlier. That was despite Szubin having plenty of time between her abduction and the police discovering them...

Harold had been too relieved at that moment to question the circumstances, but things weren't making sense. Had Szubin hesitated to harm Echika because they were acquaintances? That couldn't be it. Szubin was colleagues with Sozon, and he hadn't hesitated to murder the detective. This man was a psychopath who carefully selected his victims.

"Szubin, you ran into a pretty gruesome crime scene as soon as you got your new job at forensics, didn't you?"

Two and a half years ago, Sozon had told that to Szubin when the first murder victim showed up.

"Pardon me... I'd like to step out for a bit."

Szubin had made an expressionless remark in reply and walked off with shaky steps.

"I suppose it's still shocking. He looked paler than usual."

"It may be work, but I do sympathize. What about Chief Napolov, by the way?"

"He'll be here soon. I'm sure seeing this will make him forget all about his divorce."

Hold on. Wait.

Harold felt the temperature of his circulatory fluid drop.

"Aide Lucraft, did you call Napolov?"

The voice pulled Harold out of his thoughts. Fokine called the ambulance and turned his eyes to him. Harold casually dismissed the warning message. His quasi-breathing had completely stopped, but thankfully it was too dark for Fokine to notice.

“Investigator, is Assistant Inspector Napolov coming here alone?” he asked, keeping his voice composed.

“Yeah, because the other officers got injured when Szubin made his getaway. Didn’t you see it?” But then Fokine paused, like he’d remembered something. “Ah, wait, actually... I think Hieda might be with him.”

He went on to inform Harold that he hadn’t heard the whole conversation, but he remembered Echika asking Napolov for something.

“And with all that information, you still couldn’t narrow it down to a suspect?”

“Profiling is only conjecture.”

Sozon’s shadow came to life in his mind’s eye.

“I swear, you always misread people when you get emotional...”

He’d been too overwhelmed by anger.

“Sometimes they figure out what we’re doing and make false tells to throw us off.”

What on earth had he been looking at this whole time?

Harold broke into a run, spurred by urgency. He pulled open the door to the Niva and hopped inside. Investigator Fokine was stunned, but Harold wasn’t in any mood to care.

“Hey, wait, Aide Lucraft! Where are you—?”

He pulled the gear into reverse and began speeding back up along the trail. Szubin’s van and Fokine’s dumbfounded figure vanished behind the trees. By the time the Niva returned to the paved road, he’d already thought up a few possible destinations and narrowed them down as much as possible.

I have to hurry. Echika is in danger.

It took a moment for the blow to her cheek to fully register. Stars popped in Echika's field of vision as she lost her balance. She tumbled sideways, her body slamming into the basement floor before her mind could produce another thought. The smell of mold filled her nostrils.

The next moment, she felt something slide into the back of her neck. She realized this was a network isolation unit. Someone kicked her an instant later. A groan unlike anything she'd heard herself produce before escaped from her lips. Her limbs flapped limply as she was knocked back. She hit the wall shoulder first, and she fell facedown into the dirt.

Indescribable pain shot through her like a gag reflex. But somehow, she managed to swallow the sourness that had climbed up to her mouth.

Her mind was muddled.

What just happened?

"This is a very special place for me, you know."

Napolov's voice echoed dimly in her ears. Echika reflexively reached for the holster at her leg. She tried to grab the pistol by the grip but couldn't muster the strength to do so. The firearm slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor.

Someone came up to the gun and kicked it away. It rolled out of reach, stopping at the bottom of the stairs.

"Though I wish I could have invited Nicolai here along with you... How very unfortunate."

Echika managed to raise her head and look up. Napolov was staring down at her, the same gentle look in his eyes as always. He took off his scarf so it wouldn't restrict his movements, and she spotted an isolation unit inserted into the back of his neck. Then he took out something from beneath his coat—the electric saw he'd confiscated from Szubin.

No way. It can't be.

“Assistant Inspector...” Her mouth filled with the taste of rust when she moved her lips. “Don’t tell me you...”

“You and Harold were a real help in finding Abayev. You have my gratitude.” Napolov smiled serenely. “Some people say imitation is the greatest form of flattery, but I disagree. Seeing someone copy you...it’s appalling.”

Echika was completely speechless.

I can’t believe it.

Nothing Napolov had done hinted at this. He was an upright officer pursuing the truth behind the Nightmare incident out of regret and grief at the loss of a dear subordinate. At least he’d seemed that way.

So why?

“I might have been tied up at the time, but I regret having Szubin handle things. I should have been the one to do it.”

His hand, which had been so soft when she shook it, tightened around the electric saw. Its blade shone with what bit of light flowed into the basement. He pressed the trigger to activate it, and the tool revved to life. Echika felt her skin crawl. Alarm bells were ringing in her head.

I have to run.

“I couldn’t use Sozon’s crime scene. It’s gotten too dirty from all the things that have splattered around here.”

Get on your feet and get the hell out!

“But how fortunate it was that Harold found a new partner in you. That let me do it all over again, almost exactly like the first time...”

Her entire body was paralyzed. Echika couldn’t even blink as she locked eyes on the saw, and her ears focused on the artificial whirring sound it produced.

“This is the last time, Investigator. Please make it entertaining.”

This man is serious.

Napolov took a step forward. Echika raised her arms, and a sharp pain shot through her flank, but she ignored it and got off the ground. Napolov grabbed

her by the collar, and despite her attempts to break free, he was too strong to shake off. Could she kick him to break make a break for it? But she'd be done for if the saw caught her.

He swung the saw blade at her. Echika attempted to evade it at the last second, but she didn't quite pull back in time, and the blade skimmed the top of her shoulder.

Hot pain surged through her. Napolov kicked her in the stomach again. Then he hit her a second time, and a third. Saliva mixed with blood flew through the air. He threw her away, and she rolled over in agony on the floor again. It felt like she could cough up her entrails.

At this point, Echika couldn't get back on her feet. Her ears throbbed dully. She couldn't even tell if she was exhaling or inhaling.

"Please stop struggling. It'll make for an unsightly climax."

No... Somebody...

Her fingers trembling, she tried to reach for the isolation unit inserted into her neck, but Napolov stomped on her hand before she got the opportunity. He shifted his weight onto it, and her fingertips instantly numbed. She could feel her bones creak.

"What a pain. I should have at least brought some rope. This is why I don't like doing things ad hoc..."

She could tell her body was at its limits. Was this where she was going to die? How she was going to expire?

Between her bouts of terror, an arrogant thought floated into her mind.

When they find my body, will he—?

"I've been looking for you, Assistant Inspector Napolov."

Just then, the whirring of the electric saw stopped. Before she knew it, Echika had opened her eyes.

Ah...

Someone was at the bottom of the stairs, their perfectly sculpted physique all too familiar. There stood a custom model Amicus, a frayed scarf around his neck. Harold was beautifully expressionless as he stared at Napolov.

If anyone but him had shown up, she would have sighed in relief.

It's always like this. This Amicus always finds everything. Even...no, especially the things I don't want him to dig up.

"Did you come to watch your partner get murdered again?" Napolov was unperturbed. "I didn't think I'd get to recreate it *this* perfectly."

He calmly looked back at Harold. Napolov knew Harold had a next-generation all-purpose AI, but of course, he wasn't aware of the secret of his neuromimetic system, or that the Laws of Respect were an illusion.

She couldn't allow Harold to get near Napolov. But despite Echika's desire to intervene, Napolov's foot was still planted firmly on her hand, and the electric saw was still right in front of her. One wrong move, and she would be torn to shreds.

The only thing Echika could do was grit her teeth.

"You forgot your raincoat, Assistant Inspector." Harold glanced at Echika but soon shifted his eyes back on Napolov. "Are you giving up on your record of perfect crimes this late into the game?"

"They're near perfect crimes, honestly. Even if I get caught, all I have to do is hold on to my pride." Napolov stared at the Amicus fixedly. "It took you a while to figure things out, great detective."

Harold's eyes stirred lightly. He may not have intended it, but the skin around them twitched ever so slightly. Despite the calmness he was attempting to project, he was far from composed. It was obvious he was on the brink of being overwhelmed by rage and indignation.

"Yes, you nearly had me fooled. You acted very naturally." The Amicus's gaze crawled over the earth, tracing over Sozon's bloodstains. "Sozon and I can see through the subtle tells and gestures people make, but you never felt any regret

or guilt for your crimes.”

“So it never showed in my expressions or actions.” Napolov serenely finished his sentence. “I knew that was your limit. Your weakness, Holmes.”

Harold clenched his fingers. Echika had to get him away from here this instant. But how?

“I would have preferred that you believe Szubin was the killer. The bloody message written with the paintbrush, the surveillance camera footage, his alias... The bread crumb trail I left you was more than enough.”

“True, Szubin matched the killer’s profile. Until just a short while ago, I was convinced he was the architect of the murders. However...” Harold furrowed his brows with a hint of regret. “Then I realized that you were trying to lead me to him all along. You tried to pin everything on your partner in crime, Szubin, and have him take the fall so you could slip away.”

Napolov shrugged wordlessly.

“Why did Szubin cooperate with you?” Harold pressed him for an answer.

“I was his only friend. He was thrilled to help me,” Napolov said in an inappropriately chipper tone. “You know how emotionless he acts. He was distraught over how this prevented him from getting along with people. Earning his adoration was as simple as lending him my ear.”

“So you used those ‘counseling’ sessions to bring him over to your side.”

“Szubin was terrified of losing my friendship. He came from a very unfortunate family, and he was raised to suppress his emotions. I was the first friend he ever made.” Napolov added that he never thought of their relationship as friendship, of course. “I’ve been planning the Nightmare incident for a long time, you see. But I didn’t have enough hands on deck to pull it off.”

“So you set your sights on Szubin.”

“I suppose you could put it like that. Forensics just happened to be looking for a new officer, so I recommended him for the job. I needed a ‘friend’ who could access the personal database without raising suspicion.”

“There has to be more to it than that,” Harold said in a low voice. “Through

Sozon, you figured out that Szubin hardly makes any tells. That made him the ideal pawn to deceive the subordinate who posed the greatest threat to you, and it also gave you someone to pin the blame on.”

Napolov jerked his chin silently, unaware or uncaring of the fact that he was being accused.

“I was lucky enough to collect the pieces I needed. It would be a waste not to start the game.”

Szubin’s sole role in the crime had been to use the voice modifier to call the victims over. Only Napolov himself dispatched the victims.

“Except...you needed to have Szubin handle the ‘climax’ this time around.”

Napolov had killed Abayev in retribution for imitating his killings. After that, he’d planned what he would call “the climax,” a crime to surpass the murder of Sozon.

He would kill both Echika, a police officer, and Nicolai, a relative of one of the victims and put both of their corpses up for display. And lying next to them would be Szubin, who would commit suicide after carrying out the crime to Napolov’s satisfaction. He would shoot himself in the head, destroying his Your Forma in the process.

“I knew that my reputation would be damaged if another copycat crime like Abayev’s surfaced. I’ve had enough of being insulted,” Napolov said, with harrowing indifference. “But I’d always planned on Szubin handling the climax.”

The end had been all but decided from the moment Napolov got Szubin involved. The plan had always been to prop him up as the killer, drawing the case to a close. To accomplish this, Napolov had left hints and marks on the crime scenes so that everyone would be fooled into thinking Szubin was behind everything.

“I knew Sozon very well, which made me quite familiar with how he interpreted things.” This was how Napolov had been able to fool Sozon into profiling the killer in a certain way, he added unapologetically. “I needed to come up with a motive for Szubin’s murders and suicide, though. So I went with the topic of the day—the escalating conflicts between the Amicus sympathizers

and the machine deniers. A man as unreadable as Szubin could conceivably hide extreme hatred for one ideological cause or another... You can practically connect the dots yourself.”

“So you targeting Amicus sympathizers was all just to support that story?”

“That’s right. Except...” Napolov shook his head. “I should have politely refused Investigator Totoki’s request. I agreed so you wouldn’t grow suspicious of me, but it turned out I was digging my own grave... Plus, Szubin ended up betraying me, too.”

That was how everything went out of control, he said with a sigh.

“You found out about the voice modifier much sooner than I anticipated, but that was within an acceptable margin of error. I would have been able to put things back on track if Szubin hadn’t taken off his isolation unit and exposed his location.”

Szubin had continued obeying Napolov out of fear of losing his only “friend” — but Napolov had penned the bloody message at Abayev’s murder scene in order to frame Szubin. That was when the forensics officer realized something was off.

He suspected that Napolov was trying to pin everything on him.

Soon after that, Napolov ordered Szubin to murder Echika. He initially obeyed, kidnapping both Nicolai and Echika. His “friendship” with Napolov was too precious to violate. But in the decisive moment, Szubin hadn’t been able to go through with the murders. He ended up throwing it all away and attempting to flee. Needless to say, he hadn’t thought ahead about any of this.

Echika thought back to how Szubin had acted in the abandoned dacha.

“Investigator Hieda... You are a brilliant investigator... So you’ll...”

You’ll figure out that I’m not the real culprit.

That must have been what he was trying to say.

“There’s a limit to how much you can exploit someone’s loneliness,” Harold spat out quietly. “Calling the victim over and actually killing them are two completely different things in terms of mental strain. That should be obvious,

but that fact eluded you, since you never felt any resistance to murder to begin with.”

“Yes, I suppose he just wasn’t a kindred spirit. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“If you wanted to pin the blame on Szubin, you never should have let him become your partner-in-crime.”

“I could tell you why I wanted to get him involved, but that would be a long story.”

“I don’t care about your friendship.” The Amicus narrowed his eyes coldly. “I owe Abayev one. I wouldn’t have been able to track you down if he hadn’t bruised your foolish ego.”

A nervous shiver ran down Echika’s spine. She tried to part her lips, but the pain from her injuries overpowered everything, preventing her from speaking.

“You killed Sozon, didn’t you, Assistant Inspector?” Each word of that question fell from Harold’s mouth with the chilling cold of ice that had just begun to thaw.

Napolov tightened his grip on the electric saw.

“That’s right.”

Don’t.

“I’m the man who murdered your partner.”

Each and every vowel that left his lips hung pregnant in the air. Silence filled the room. Suddenly, Harold covered his eyes with a hand. He bent over where he was, as if he couldn’t bear to stand anymore. Hanging his head, he curled his back like he was enduring something. He was clearly overwhelmed by shock.

Harold wasn’t reacting like Echika feared, but she couldn’t hurry over to his side now.

“Two years ago...I called you when I went looking for Sozon, but the call wouldn’t connect. The other detectives said you were in a technologically restricted zone, but that was a lie, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was.”

“What you *actually* did was use an isolation unit to murder Sozon at this abandoned house...” The Amicus’s voice was faint, and it just barely broke through the silence. “I’ll have you confess to everything, right here, right now.”

“Very well.” Napolov’s gaze returned to Echika. “I’ll tell you the whole story after I cut this woman to pieces.”

Napolov curled his fingertip around the trigger of the saw again, but then he suddenly raised his foot off of Echika’s hand.

No, he hadn’t raised it—Napolov had staggered in place. The moment Echika realized this, the sound caught up to what she’d seen. A loud, deafening blast shook her eardrums.

A gunshot.

Echika could only stare in amazement. Napolov fell limply to his knees. Even through the dark, she could see blood gushing out from his thigh. He was staring at his leg, his eyes wide with shock.

“No. You’re going to tell me *now*.”

Harold was on his feet, confidently *holding an automatic pistol*—Echika’s pistol, the one Napolov had kicked away earlier. He’d knelt down earlier to pick it up without drawing attention. He must have learned that trick from Liza Robin.

Harold had just shot Napolov.

He’d injured a human being.

Echika couldn’t even blink.

Oh no, what is this?! Her instincts whispered to her fearfully.

She intellectually knew that Harold was capable of this, of course, but seeing it in person was something else. She had never been afraid of Harold before.

“What did you...?” Napolov whispered, confused. “This isn’t possible—”

“Answer me.” Harold kept the pistol fixed on him. “Why did you kill Sozon? What kind of motive could drive you to do something so brutal?”

“Are you malfunctioning or something? What happened to your Laws of

Respect?!”

“I’m asking the questions here.”

Harold took a step forward. Seeing this, Napolov must have felt he was in danger. He threw away the electric saw and drew a revolver from his side holster and fired it. But he missed the shot in his hurry, and the muzzle of Harold’s pistol flashed again. The Amicus’s bullet dug into Napolov’s dominant hand with frightening accuracy. Napolov groaned. He nearly tipped over but managed to stay on his feet.

The revolver slipped from Napolov’s fingers and disappeared into the dark.

Stop it. Echika tried to step in and hold Harold back, but she could only stir. The sharp pain running through her stomach prevented her from getting up. She must have cracked a rib. *Aaah, dammit!*

“S-stop...” Her voice came out as weakly as a breath, failing to reach anyone’s ears.

“This can’t be,” Napolov said, a tense smile playing over his lips. “Harold, you weren’t like this before. You were normal. Why did you do this?”

“You changed me.”

Harold approached Napolov, the pistol still fixed on him as he reached down to the floor. He picked up the fallen electric saw and took it in his hands, sizing up its weight. Echika felt all the blood drain from her face.

This is bad. Not this.

“...You started by cutting off Sozon’s right hand.”

Harold pressed the trigger of the saw.

“Fine, stop, I get it,” Napolov said in resignation. “But do you even need to hear the motive from my lips? You and Sozon already hit on everything a long time ago.”

“We never figured out it was you in all this time. What exactly did we discover?”

“Two and a half years ago, Sozon profiled me as follows: ‘The killer must have

repressed their violent tendencies until a major stressor arose in their life, triggering the murder...” Napolov pressed down on the wound on his arm, his breathing growing labored. “I’d just divorced my wife back then. But you’d be disappointed if I told you that was the reason, wouldn’t you?”

Echika desperately tried to move her hand. She didn’t have the time to just lie there and listen to their exchange. She slowly shambled into a crawl, creeping along the ground.

“I’m not disappointed. People like you always turn to violence when stressed. Sozon said that you turned to murder because you had no other way of venting your stress.” Harold’s tone was steeped in cold anger. “But still, why kill him? Did Sozon figure out you were the killer? Or did you just hate him?”

“It was neither of those. I respected him, actually. He was a brilliant detective and a subordinate I took pride in.”

“Then why?” Harold gritted his teeth audibly. “Why did you butcher him?”

“You’re a machine. Why are you so torn up about his death?” Napolov scoffed at him provocatively. “I’ve always thought you were much more human than I was, Harold...”

“Stop changing the subject.”

Echika gritted her teeth as she crawled on. She’d hardly made several meters of progress, but the basement was small. The thing that had fallen in the dark was getting closer. She desperately reached out to it and pulled it over to her.

“Ah, fine, I’ll blab. It’s simple, really—I got tired of taking out similar victims. Everyone gets sick of eating the same dish every day, right? And if the detective in charge of the case died at that point, the incident would become more sensational and draw more attention...”

When Echika turned around, Napolov’s body gave out, and he fell to the ground with a dull thud. Harold watched it play out coldly.

“You’ve disappointed me, Napolov,” he spat out. “Don’t expect an easy death.”

The electric saw sang out in a ruthless timbre.

“You’re going that far, Aide Lucraft...?!”

Echika finally managed to raise her voice in a shout, and this time, it echoed clearly in the basement. Harold turned to look at her, as though he’d finally remembered she was there. Yet the saw still whirred in his grip.

“Drop your weapon...right now.”

Echika sat up, feeling as though the agony would tear her apart. She propped her hand against the wall, using it to get to her feet. Her knees were buckling, perhaps because they were injured. She didn’t know, and it honestly didn’t matter. Right now, she was solely focused on holding up Napolov’s revolver, which she’d picked up off the ground a few moments ago. Its cold weight pressed into her palm. Suppressing her reluctance, she fixed its sights on Harold.

“...I’ll say it one more time,” Echika repeated. “Put the saw down.”

Harold didn’t obey. His grip was still tight around the electric saw. His well-sculpted facial features were locked in an expressionless mask that hid his fury. Even with a gun fixed on him, he didn’t so much as flinch, let alone listen to her.

Oh, why...?!

“A falling-out?” Napolov laughed feebly. “You’re going to get scrapped, Harold...”

The Amicus slammed his shoe into Assistant Inspector Napolov’s stomach. Echika’s shoulders jolted. Napolov groaned and went limp as he went unconscious. He wasn’t fatally wounded, but the blood loss could eventually kill him. Echika couldn’t afford to lose the suspect before he even got arrested.

“Aide Lucraft,” she called out in a low voice. He did not respond. “Hurry up and comply. I...I don’t want to have to aim a gun at you.”

She didn’t have the presence of mind to come up with any pretense. All she could do was implore him.

Suddenly, Harold’s lips curled. It wasn’t a smile but an expression of

exasperation and, at the same time, self-derision. His frozen, lakelike eyes contorted slightly.

“You know, don’t you, Echika?”

The meaning behind that question was self-evident. The RF Models’ neuromimetic system. The fact that the Laws of Respect didn’t actually exist.

Something cold slithered down her throat. Her palm broke into a sweat against the grip of her pistol. There was no stopping this from happening anymore. Echika had known she would end up coming face-to-face with the truth about him from the moment Harold shot Napolov—no, from the moment he’d gotten involved with this case. Now that it had happened, there was no point in trying to hide his secret anymore.

“Even though I’m holding this gun, you’re only afraid, not surprised.” Harold’s tone was soft, yet terribly artificial. “Did Professor Lexie tell you about me?”

Echika clenched her quivering jaw. “...Yes.”

“She must have revealed that to you when Aidan Farman abducted me.”

Her fingers grew even colder. She thought she’d done a good job hiding it.

“...God. You knew I noticed,” she said.

“That’s when you started acting strange. But I tried to deny the possibility.” Harold’s gaze momentarily fell to Napolov’s unconscious form. “I still can’t believe it. Why would an officer like you play along with Professor Lexie’s lie?”

“That’s...”

“The RF Models are in violation of the IAEC’s evaluation standards. You must know that covering for me is a crime. Did Professor Lexie coerce you somehow?”

“She didn’t.” Echika shook her head at once. “I chose to do this of my own volition.”

“So you justified committing a crime because you wanted an investigator aide who could keep up with you.”

Why did he have to put it like that? Echika felt anger bubble inside her abruptly. Yes, that had been her reason at first. Harold was invaluable to her as an investigator aide because she couldn’t “break” him with her exceptional data processing abilities.

But not now. Not anymore.

Fury inexplicably clawed its way up to her throat, but she couldn’t quite explain it. Echika gritted her teeth.

“Either way, you’re too kind to shoot me.” Harold glanced at her gun. “Would you please put that thing away?”

Calm down. Think of a way to get Harold out of here. You can’t let him hurt Napolov...hurt a human being anymore. There’s still time. You can still make it.

“I...I didn’t hold my tongue to let you do this.”

“Please don’t force your problems onto me,” he spat out calmly. “I’m grateful to you for guarding my secret, but I never asked you to do that.”

“Yes, I did this of my own accord. But are you telling me to expose you after all this?”

“It would be the right thing to do. You’re an officer of the law.”

“If I were in your shoes, you wouldn’t let me carry out my revenge.”

“Either way, you sabotaged your own efforts. You tried to hide the secret, but it ended up being for nothing.”

“Enough with your nonsense. Just do as I say. I can shoot you, and I will if I have to.”

Even as he spoke, Harold never aimed the gun in his hand at her. Maybe Napolov was the only person he wanted to shoot; Harold was thinking this through, trying to find a way to get Echika to lower her gun and allow him to continue his vengeance.

So she had to come up with an answer first. What would be the right thing to

do? Fire a warning shot? No, this place was too cramped and too dark for that. She could end up hitting Napolov by mistake, too.

Shooting in the dark.

A memory of a summer night, filled with the smell of smoke, crossed her mind.

“...Did *you* blow the door off its hinges back then?”

A brief shadow of surprise crossed Harold’s face. Echika had nearly choked to death when the generator room at Interpol headquarters was bombed. The fact that she was able to shoot off the emergency door’s hinges accurately had been close to a miracle. Even she doubted that she’d done it.

But now she knew for sure. Harold had saved her.

“Why?” Echika asked, licking her lips. “You...you *worked so hard to hide the truth* of your system so you could take revenge. Why risk everything to save me?”

Harold fell silent for a few seconds. That was a long pause for an Amicus.

“I thought I would need you around as an electronic investigator to help me find the killer. There was no one else there to see me, so your death would have been a net negative...”

“Stop lying to me. You found Napolov just fine without me Brain Diving.”

“That doesn’t matter right now.”

“It does matter!” The pain in her flank shot up, reminding her of its presence. Echika nearly staggered on her feet. “You protected me for contradictory reasons, too. Deep down, you don’t really want to take revenge on the killer like thi—”

“This isn’t just simple vengeance.” Harold cut her off sharply. “This is my closure. My atonement.”

Atonement?

The sweat clinging to her palm regained some of its warmth. She’d always assumed Harold wanted to exact reprisal upon the Nightmare killer out of anger

over Sozon's murder. She'd thought he was after revenge—but come to think of it, Harold himself had never once used that word.

Echika was confused. What would he need to atone for?

"...I can finally end everything." Harold's gaze was filled with something akin to yearning. "I can finally achieve what I failed to do that day."

What he failed to do that day...

"You see, the Laws of Respect don't exist. I should have been able to come to Sozon's defense that day. I shouldn't have been helpless as Napolov tied me up. I could have resisted and saved Sozon." It looked less like he was imploring Echika and more like he was scolding himself. "But...that didn't occur to me back then. Instead, I desperately hid the part of me that longed to oppose the Laws of Respect, but not from everyone else. I hid it from myself."

Echika was at a loss for a response. Was Harold telling the truth? Did he really feel this way?

"And because I couldn't acknowledge reality, Sozon's loved ones suffer to this day. Darya, Elena, Nicolai... If I had saved Sozon back then, they wouldn't have to live with all this grief. They would be happy."

"My husband...passed away a year and a half ago. He was killed during the Amicus sympathizer serial murder case."

"I feel bad for him, but he's different from us, so he'll be fine."

"It doesn't matter what you say, it won't change the fact you let Sozon die!"

Darya's frail smile, Nicolai's whisper, and Elena's shouting flashed through Echika's mind one by one. Amicus never argued back, even when people lashed out at them. They were always loyal, amicable, and kind companions. But Harold wasn't that simple. He was much more complicated than that. Every emotion people threw at him, be it kindness or outrage, tore at his heart, deepening the cracks that had been carved into it.

But of course, no one knew that. Even if they did, Harold wouldn't allow anyone to acknowledge it.

Echika was utterly stunned.

No.

“It’s like I killed Sozon myself.”

No! Napolov murdered him, not you. Not you!

“I’ve been dreaming of this moment ever since that day. Please, don’t get in my way.”

Dark resolve brewed in Harold’s eyes. It burned silently, unwaveringly. He tightened his grip around the saw as though it were his lifeline. Like he’d stop breathing if he let go of it.

“...No.” Echika shook her head slowly, her short hair brushing her bruised, swollen cheek.

Even so, no.

“If you’re going to insist on killing Napolov, I’ll stop you... Even it means shooting you.”

Was this a bluff, or was she serious? Echika couldn’t tell herself. Maybe it was both.

“I see.” Harold averted his gaze from her in resignation. “Very well.”

With that monotonous whisper, he swung down the saw without warning, moving it in an arc to saw off Napolov’s arm.

She didn’t have time to think.

Echika pulled the trigger out of sheer reflex. She staggered where she stood, unable to withstand the recoil as the roar of the gun shook her body to the core. The bullet dug into Harold’s right shoulder. His fingers slackened, and the electric saw fell from his grip.

The reverberation of the exchange echoed through the basement. Black fluid fell to the soil of the floor with clear dripping sounds.

Circulatory fluid.

Echika snapped back to reality. What had she done? By the time she realized what was going on, Harold had thrown away his pistol and walked over to her. The basement was small; all it took were a few steps for him to be right in front

of her. He grabbed Echika by the wrist and bent it. Napolov's revolver slipped from her grasp, silently falling to her feet. Then he pinned her with one arm and pushed her against the wall.

He did it forcefully—more roughly than a normal Amicus would ever treat a human being. Echika suppressed a groan from leaving her lips—her entire body screamed out in pain.

"I was foolish to think you wouldn't shoot," he breathed out, his face right in front of hers.

His hand was clasped so tightly around her wrist that she could hear her muscles creak. His right arm dangled limply. Her shot must have severed one of the cables inside it. Black circulatory fluid was streaked across the back of his hand.

I didn't want to shoot you, she argued back in her mind. *I didn't think I could shoot you.*

Suppressing her discomposure, Echika somehow managed to look back at his face.

"I didn't..." Her voice came out huskier than she thought it would. "...want you to...hurt anyone, anymore..."

"So you won't even let me atone?"

"Even if you don't do it yourself, the law will judge Napolov. He'll go to prison for life."

But even as she said it, she knew this wouldn't work. This empty justification meant nothing to him. This wouldn't faze Harold in the slightest.

Aaah, why...? You could lead me away from my past, so why can't I find the way to reach you?

"I doubt prison will give him the kind of pain he inflicted on Sozon."

"But if you kill him, you'll end up in a pod like Steve did."

"I've already shot a human being. It's over for me that way no matter what I do next."

“No, it isn’t. Napolov is still alive.”

“That means nothing.”

“Detective Sozon wouldn’t want you to kill anyone!”

“This has nothing to do with what Sozon wouldn’t have wanted, only with what you don’t want me to do. You’re just afraid to lose the only investigator aide who can work with you.”

“No, I’m not! I...!”

In her frustration, Echika used her unrestrained hand to grab Harold’s right palm. The hand that was so human but was now lifeless and unmoving.

You’re wrong. You’ve got it all wrong.

She gritted her teeth.

“It’s not an investigator aide I’m afraid of losing... It’s you.”

The moment Echika said that, Harold felt all the damage alerts in his system suddenly go silent. She stood in front of him, her tormented expression before his eyes. Her cheek was badly swollen and her lips were dirty with dried blood. And yet her eyes were fixed unflinchingly on Harold, like they might emit sparks at any second.

“I’m afraid of losing you.”

The significance of those words filled his mind.

“...Are you saying you’re going to become dependent on me, like you were on Matoi?”

“No.” She shook her head feebly. “That’s not what I mean. No... Maybe you’re right. I don’t know. But...” *But*, she repeated, catching her breath. “What you’re doing isn’t right. I have to stop you.”

He felt anger surge up in him again—he wasn’t wrong at all. She didn’t understand a thing. He wished he could shout at her, tell her to stop forcing her

simple sense of justice on him. Would he have to drag Echika out of the basement and throw her outside? Or lock her away somewhere until he was done? Terrible thoughts crossed his mind.

Even though he knew he couldn't do any of those things.

If he was capable of it, he'd have done it back when she started objecting. His system told him that the ideal way to achieve his revenge was to shoot Echika—but he hadn't been able to bring himself to do that.

Even when he'd shot Napolov, the flood of emotions he couldn't process had practically threatened to split his head in two. But in that case, his anger had won out. He'd needed to see it through.

But the situation with Echika was different. This wasn't taking revenge for Sozon. Even now, the most he could do was restrain her slender wrist. He shuddered at the pale softness in his hand.

"Didn't you promise Darya you'd always come home?" Echika continued, trying to sway him. "If you kill Napolov here, you'll be leaving her all alone."

She was right. On the day of Sozon's burial, he'd promised Darya he would never leave her alone. But...

"I've been at her side long enough." Against his will, Darya's sweet smile surfaced in his memory. He shut the replay down. "She...she deserves to be free. She'd be better off without me."

"Free?" Echika frowned.

"Darya is fixated on me. Or maybe I'm the one who's obsessed with her. Either way, this is for the best. If I could fill the void Sozon left behind..."

"That's right. You saved Darya by being there for her."

"But it has to end at some point."

An irrepressible emotion surged up within him. Since when had Echika gotten so good at slipping into his heart? Or was his emotional engine just getting more vulnerable?

When did this start? Was it...when I first met her?

"If...", he somehow managed to say. "If I can end everything here, if I can exact justice on Napolov, Darya will be able to move on. For real this time..."

"You're just trying to convince yourself. She'd grieve you if you left her."

Yes. She would.

He knew that perfectly well. He'd made the wrong choice. He shouldn't have treated Echika with kindness when they first met. He'd approached her under the assumption he could use her for his own ends, but he'd wound up wrapped around her little finger.

"...You're free to become reliant on me if you want it that badly, but I'm going to make my own choices."

"Then go ahead and shoot me already."

He was nearly overwhelmed for a second. "Is that really what you want?"

"What you're doing is wrong," she said again.

She clenched his right arm.

Aaah, she knows. She knows I can't hurt her. She knew it the whole time.

At first, he'd thought he could read her like a book, but she'd flipped the script on him at some point.

"Listen to me and listen carefully." Echika looked straight at Harold. "You did not kill Detective Sozon. It's not your fault. It's not anyone's fault."

Don't.

"You did everything you could back then."

Stop it.

"Darya told me about how you tracked down Detective Sozon. Even when the police didn't give you the time of day, you went in to save him alone."

No. I was just conceited. I was confident I could do it myself. And I couldn't find the killer when he was right under my nose.

"You have nothing to atone for. You're not guilty of anything. So—"

"Shut up." Harold cut her off with a choked voice.

He didn't want to hear any kind words. He didn't want to be consoled. He didn't want to be affirmed.

He didn't want to be forgiven.

Should he have brought more people with him instead of going in on his own that night? What would have happened if he'd dragged Sozon out of the office that night and brought him home? Harold had lost track of the thousands upon tens of thousands of what-ifs he'd asked himself since the murder.

This was why he needed to atone. He at least needed to put Napolov through what Sozon had suffered for there to be justice. It didn't matter if he was being unproductive and irrational. He just wanted to do it. He had to do it. To put an end to something that couldn't possibly end, he had to cling to this desire, to struggle, to prove that he could achieve now what he'd failed to do on that fateful day.

Otherwise, the memory would keep replaying in his head forever, and he would never escape it.

Echika was right. What Harold called atonement was just his attempt to save himself. He was refusing to acknowledge that this was all for his own satisfaction. Yet this was the only way he could conceive of moving on from this. He couldn't give up.

And yet... And still...

"...Aide Lucraft."

Echika whispered in amazement. It was only then that Harold felt a cold sensation running down his cheek. It wasn't circulatory fluid; it was closer to water. He let go of her arm in surprise and raised his hand to touch his face.

Why?

At that moment, he couldn't help but loathe Professor Lexie. The neuromimetic system was such an absurd concept. Things would have been so much easier if he were a machine that acted like a machine; an empty, current-generation Amicus that felt nothing and smiled as commanded by his programming. If he'd been made like that, nothing would hurt him, no matter how cruel reality was or how many spiteful words were thrown his way. He

wouldn't be tormented by all this uncontrollable anger. It was exhausting, being so close to, yet so far from, human.

Yes. So very, very exhausting.

"...Please. Don't be kind to me."

Echika furrowed her brows as though she was in pain but didn't say anything. She wasn't even grabbing him to keep him from running away anymore. She simply stood there, patiently awaiting his next words, like that was the natural thing to do.

What are you doing? The way you act is really so incorrigible, so undeniable. I can't go there because I still haven't achieved anything yet. And still...

"Sozon, he...," Harold finally said, unable to restrain himself. "He told me to find the killer..."

"...And you've done that."

"Yes, but it's not enough. I still need to pass judgment on him."

"No, you don't have to do that."

"I want to atone for Sozon... I saw his limbs get cut off. Eventually, I stopped hearing his voice... He bled so, so much when his head got cut off."

"You don't have to remember that."

"Am I really incapable of doing anything?"

"That's not true. You've already done so much."

"No, I haven't done anything yet."

"You've done enough. More than enough."

"It's not enough—"

"It is!"

Echika reached out to him with her slender arms. She stood on her tiptoes and pulled Harold's head into an embrace, as though she feared he would fall apart and shatter otherwise. And maybe she was right to think so.

"It's enough." Echika's muffled voice repeated, trying to calm him. "You've

done enough...”

She clumsily ran her fingers through his hair, like she was comforting a child. She did it over and over, even though she’d scarcely experienced the same herself.

Harold wanted to atone to Sozon. Those were his honest feelings. But before he even realized it, his one functioning hand was clinging to Echika’s back. Despite her almost fragile daintiness, she was filled with firm heat that was anything but delicate—human warmth. It was slightly hotter than his own body heat, and its warmth seeped into him.

It was...soothing.

But the fact that this thought crossed his mind for even a moment flooded him with guilt.

“You can forgive yourself.”

No. I can’t. Come what may, I don’t want to forgive myself.

Even though he whispered that without putting it into words, Echika seemed to have heard it.

“Then...I won’t forgive you, in your place.” Her whisper was all too gentle. “So you can forgive yourself. I want you to forgive yourself. By now—”

The words that followed sank into the darkness of the basement. Perhaps they were buried under the weight of tears that remained unshed. But even so, it was certainly heard—it lifted him up.

✱

Echika felt as though she’d only embraced Harold for a few minutes. When she heard the wailing of the sirens from afar, Echika gently let go of him. This was probably the Saint Petersburg city police. They must have grown suspicious that they couldn’t get in contact with her or Napolov and begun searching.

She looked at Harold.

“...That’s probably Investigator Fokine. I didn’t turn off my GPS tracking.”

He reached for his wet cheek, covering it with a hand. Echika hadn't known that Amicus were equipped with the capacity to shed tears. Or maybe that was unique to the RF Models. He wiped it off with a hint of bitterness, like it was a circulatory fluid leak.



“Right.” Echika sniffled. Her eyes felt a little moist, too. “Um... Don’t say anything when the officers get here. Your memory is safeguarded, so just look shocked like you did earlier.”

“Yes.” Harold nodded, but he only seemed to understand a moment later. “Echika, is that—?”

“I promised the professor I’d protect you.”

But then she suddenly remembered what Professor Lexie had once told her.

“If you do change your mind, I don’t particularly care if you publish the truth.”

Echika still couldn’t tell if that was a joke or if she was serious. But by now it didn’t matter. Regardless of her promise to the professor, she wasn’t going to out Harold’s secret to the world. For some reason, she was even more sure of this now than she had been after Farman’s incident.

She didn’t want to lose Harold. Not because he was her Belay, but because she didn’t want to lose *him*.

“Echika.” The Amicus parted his lips slowly. “If you... If you’re trying to treat me as Matoi’s replacement, then I don’t think that’s advisable.”

It came as no surprise that he would see things this way. She was, in fact, fixated on him. And while Echika believed it was different from her obsession with her sister, she still couldn’t explain what was different about it. No... Maybe she didn’t want to put it into words. If she tried to put a name to these feelings, to give them proper form, then they’d have long since warped into something nasty and fallen apart. She’d want to cast them away. Because it would make her emotions conceited and filthy.

She was scared, so she wanted to keep things ambiguous.

“...I don’t think I see you as a replacement for Matoi.”

“Are you sure?”

“We don’t have time for this right now. Let me handle everything.” She strained her ears. The sirens were getting much closer. “Like I said earlier, just hold your tongue.”

Echika removed the isolation unit attached to her. She turned to look at Napolov. He was still unconscious, but alive.

“Let’s go outside.”

She spurred Harold along, but he didn’t take a single step. In the end, she was the first to step on the stairs. The pain in her flank still lingered, and the idle thought that she’d need to have it looked at crossed her mind.

Harold still looked over the basement. His atonement hadn’t played out at all as he’d expected, and he probably hadn’t forgiven himself yet. But still, had she managed to get through to him, even a little bit? She couldn’t tell yet, but...

“Harold.”

This time, he turned to face Echika. For some reason, he looked like a lost child with nowhere to go—and indeed, come to think of it, this Amicus hadn’t lived half the number of years she had. It was easy to forget that.

She reached out her hand.

“Let’s go home.”

His frozen lakelike eyes widened slightly. Harold stared at Echika’s hand for a brief moment and then wordlessly took it. It had the same faint warmth as always. This time, they climbed up the steps together, but Echika ended up staggering, and he had to catch her.

They climbed out of the hatch, and the house’s interior was much brighter than it had been when she’d arrived. They made their way to the front door, the floorboards creaking under them. They pulled the front door open with ease.

The stabbing winds of early morning played with Echika’s bangs. Before long, the dark of night left the sky. As the violet color of dawn faded, the faint outlines of the clouds drew a gentle curve.

“...It’s daybreak,” Harold whispered.

For some reason, she thought she could hear the tears that had already stopped mingled in his words.

4

“So Assistant Inspector Napolov brought you here with the intent of killing you?”

“Correct. In fact, he wanted to involve not just me but Mr. Nicolai, too.”

A few police cars arrived at the abandoned house a short while later, and as Harold expected, Investigator Fokine’s Volvo was among them. The officers got out of the cars and entered the house one by one.

Detective Akim—the small, redheaded detective from Elena’s questioning—managed the crime scene. He’d taken over the incident in place of Assistant Inspector Napolov.

“This is terrible.” Akim covered his eyes like he was dizzy. Hardly an abnormal reaction to hearing that the superior you trusted was a serial killer. “So did he also injure Harold?”

Echika glanced at the Amicus beside her. Harold pressed a hand to his injured right shoulder and hung his head. He made to part his lips, but she quickly cut him off.

“Yes. Napolov tried to shoot me, but Harold shielded me.”

“That’s a terrible wound. You should go to a repair shop after this.”

“We will, of course. Aide Lucraft, could you get in the Niva?” Echika softly pushed Harold’s back. “If you don’t rest carefully, your circulatory fluid leak could get worse.”

“But, Echika—”

“Just do it to put Detective Akim at ease, okay?”

Echika pushed Harold toward the Niva. He still seemed discontented but walked to his car reluctantly. The Amicus had lost his composure, and if he ended up blurting out that he’d shot Napolov, there’d be no going back.

“I’m sorry, Investigator, but could you take the time to go over what exactly

happened during the shooting?” Akim asked in a reserved manner.

This was part of the investigation, so there was no neglecting this. Echika held her aching flank as she told the detective the story she’d come up with.

First, Harold hurried into the basement, where Napolov took him hostage, and so she had to shoot Napolov twice. She hit his leg and arm respectively. Napolov fired back, shooting at Echika twice, too, but Harold stood between them and took one of the rounds. After that, they got the gun out of Napolov’s hands and both escaped the basement—

“Detective Akim!”

A voice cut into their exchange, interrupting Echika’s report. Investigator Fokine came out of the house and ran over, the hems of his coat flapping.

“The Assistant Inspector came to,” Fokine said. “We called for an ambulance, so we’ll be carrying him out of the basement. He said he wanted to get some fresh air.”

After hearing Echika’s story, Akim was surprised by this. “He can walk on his own?”

“His arteries are all unharmed, so he can move so long as someone supports him. The other officers are calling you over, too.”

“Understood.” Akim jerked his chin. “Investigator, I’ll come over to follow up on this later.”

Akim hurried to the front door. From here on out, the city police would interrogate them for a while and comb the basement for evidence. Even so, they wouldn’t discover any evidence of Harold attacking Napolov. He left no fingerprints, and even if they discovered any gunpowder on his clothes, the Laws of Respect guaranteed that Amicus should be safe, so they wouldn’t look into it any further.

The only problems were Napolov’s testimony and Mnemosynes. He’d witnessed the moment Harold fired the gun. Fokine said he had regained consciousness, but she doubted he would start talking right away. But if he did, it was possible the testimony Echika had just given would fall apart.

What do I do?

Echika panicked on the inside but feigned composure as she looked to Fokine. He shot a sympathetic look back at her.

“We’ll have the ambulance crew take a look at you once they get here. Your cheek is really swollen.”

“Yes, let’s,” she said, though her wounds were honestly the last thing on her mind right now. “What happened to Szubin after that?”

“He crashed his car and was hospitalized. The ambulance crew said it looked like a cerebral contusion... But it’s probably not life-threatening.” At that point, Fokine glanced at the Niva. “Aide Lucraft figured out Napolov was the killer right away. He left me behind and just went off. God...”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, still restless. “His judgment wasn’t exactly sound...”

“True. But if you’d ended up being hacked into pieces, I’d regret not listening to him for the rest of my life, so—”

Suddenly, they heard the sound of something rupturing from afar. Echika and Fokine froze and turned their heads. Unless they’d heard wrong, it was a gunshot—and it seemed to have come from inside the house.

It can’t be.

Fokine bolted toward the house, and Echika took off after him. Of course, with her injuries she couldn’t move too quickly. They pushed through the creaking front door and were immediately met with shouting. What was going on? Echika and Fokine rushed down the hall and found Detective Akim kneeling in front of the hatch.

“What’s going on?!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think he’d—”

“He’s still alive!”

“Stop the bleeding!”

“I can’t!”

As those voices came from beneath, a large puddle of blood spread from the bottom of the hatch. A group of officers were surrounding Napolov, lying facedown. He had a pistol in his hand, which one of the officers pulled from his grasp.

Echika's thoughts went blank.

"Even if I get caught, all I have to do is hold on to my pride."

Was this what he meant by that?

"Oh, come on." She heard Fokine mumble to himself. "He went for suicide...?"

She heard the blaring sirens of an ambulance in the distance.



The Brain Diving warrant for Napolov was issued roughly eight hours after the ambulance took him away.

"Napolov is out of surgery and was moved to the ICU... But isn't his condition too unstable for a Brain Dive?"

"The higher-ups concluded that we should Brain Dive while we can, since his condition could deteriorate at any time."

Harold and Echika strode through the Saint Petersburg Union Care Center's lobby. Harold had ended up being taken to a repair shop and needed to hurry back to the hospital after being fixed.

"How are your injuries?" Harold glanced at her in concern.

"It's just a few cracked ribs. I'm fine. They gave me painkillers."

Echika clutched her abdomen, which was being held in place with a medical bust stabilizer band. After the ambulance crew arrived, they—or rather, their diagnosis AI—determined she had multiple cracked ribs. Thankfully, she hadn't suffered any damage to her internal organs, and they placed a transdermal patch on her swollen cheek. She did need a few stitches for the cut on her palm, however. Either way, while she looked pretty banged up, she wasn't in danger.

"Forget me. We need to focus on the Brain Dive right now."

The two crossed the door to the ICU and were immediately met with the stinging scent of disinfectant. The place was integrated with a nurse station, with multiple sickbeds separated by sterilized curtains. Echika flashed her ID card to a nurse Amicus and headed for Napolov's bed.

"We've been waiting for you, Investigator Hieda. You too, Harold."

Detective Akim, who was standing by the bed, turned to face them. He was the one who'd petitioned the top brass for Napolov's Brain Dive. He hoped to discover the truth behind the incident through Napolov's Mnemosynes, and he wanted it done while the man was still alive. His logic was sound.

"How's Napolov's condition?"

"He's comatose. The doctors said it's a wonder he's still alive, and the chances of him making a recovery are slim to none..."

Echika turned to look at the bed. Napolov had an oxygen mask on, and his eyes were closed. He had a thick bandage wrapped over his head and tubes inserted all over his body. It was hard to believe that the man lying in bed like this was the very same person who'd attacked her in the basement.

Napolov had stolen a gun from one of the officers leading him out of the basement and shot himself in the head. The other members of the city police who were there had failed to get the gun away from him, and the bullet had caused a major wound in his cerebrum.

Napolov had been too proud to accept incarceration. But to think he would choose death over it...

"We were careless." Akim bit his lips, frustrated. His face was pale, making it clear he hadn't gotten any rest. "Now that we can't take testimony from him, our only hope is your Brain Dive. It's just..."

The detective turned his eyes to Harold, worried. Echika understood his unspoken concern. If she Brain Dived into Napolov, Harold would have to confront his worst memory—the Mnemosyne of Sozon's murder—yet again. She understood there was no time to hesitate in this situation, but still.

"Don't worry," Harold said softly, sensing their intentions. "This is my case. No matter how painful these Mnemosynes might be, I will have to face them head-

on.”

He’d long since decided. And perhaps the one silver lining here was that Harold, as the Belayer, wouldn’t feel Napolov’s emotions flooding into him.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?” Echika breathed in through her nose.

“Yes.” He nodded deeply. “Let’s get ready.”

I’ll just have to believe these words for now.

They connected the cords with the nurse Amicus’s assistance. With Napolov in a coma, there was no need for sedatives. Echika connected the Brain Diving cord plugged into the back of Napolov’s neck into her own port and handed the Lifeline to Harold, who plugged it into the port in his ear without a second thought.

The Lifeline lit up faintly, brushing against his left cheek. There were no traces of tears there anymore. Echika exchanged a glance with Detective Akim, who stood by the curtain. The detective nodded back. Then she once again turned her eyes to Harold.

It was time to confirm the truth behind the Nightmare, before they could put it behind them.

“Begin, Echika.”

Harold whispered to her. Echika left her body behind, his words gently pushing her forward.

She plunged into the sea of electrons, which greeted her as the other Brain Dive targets did. She reached for the surface Mnemosynes. What she saw was vague at first, an image contorted like shattered fragments stitched together into a patchwork. Napolov’s injuries had affected his consciousness, so his memories had gotten blurred.

Suddenly, the earsplitting sound of a gunshot whizzed by. She was surrounded by police officers. Akim’s face flashed by.

“Enough.” “If they’re going to peer into my Mnemosynes...” “May as well end it.”

The darkness of the basement filled her field of vision.

No. I need to go back before this. To trace the outline of his crimes.

She passed the Mnemosyne as a faint exchange echoed in her ears. It was probably her chat with Harold. The image of the Amicus pointing the gun at him.

Aah, I can’t let anyone see this one...

Suddenly, everything regained its vividness. Echika saw herself sitting anxiously in the passenger’s seat. Napolov was hiding the electric saw he’d picked up at the dacha in his pocket.

“The killer behind the Nightmare of Petersburg murders is Kazimir Martinovich Szubin.”

Aah. His heart brimmed with disappointment.

“Everything went out of control.” “If Szubin gets caught, it’s all over.” “I wish I could close this up gracefully.” “I guess this is karma.”

Echika went further back. Mnemosynes flew past her, popping like bubbles. Suddenly, she saw a bloody message being scrawled. The unexpected sight nauseated Echika—it was Abayev’s murder scene. She and Harold were in the living room, along with the forensics team and the mill robots. Szubin turned his eyes to Napolov.

“Assistant Inspector Napolov, there’s something I want you to see...”

Napolov followed him to an adjacent room and closed the door behind them.

“What is this...?” Szubin asked him in a murmur. “Why use an artist’s paintbrush?”

“Isn’t it ideal for writing?” Napolov asked calmly.

“It’ll cause...misunderstandings.”

“It won’t serve as decisive evidence either way.”

“You told me I should make my alias Montmartre. That was...”

“I only proposed it because you were wavering,” Napolov said, remaining collected. ***“We’re friends, Szubin. Why would I endanger us both like that?”***

Szubin only shook his head gently and fell quiet. At that point, Napolov was convinced he’d placated him—but the truth was that Szubin hadn’t been able to let go of his misgivings about Napolov. That was when he began to feel threatened by the assistant inspector and found the will to betray him.

The Mnemosyne changed.

A splatter of blood filled her field of vision. Abayev’s body was being hacked to pieces before her eyes. Echika had to look away. Napolov’s cold, polluted, mud-like rage filled her mind.

“This is for the best.” “That’ll teach him.” “No one’s going to make a fool out of me again.”

His fury was so intense that Echika feared touching it would cut into her fingers. Napolov propped Abayev’s body on the sofa, used a brand-new brush to write the letters on the floor, then completed the scene with the tablet lying around.

“This is ‘genuine.’”

Having finished his crime, Napolov left Abayev’s apartment. He avoided the security cameras and made his way to the parking lot, where Szubin was waiting for him by their shared car, a hood obscuring his features. He’d used his voice modifier to impersonate a friend of Abayev’s and get him to unlock the door.

“I told you to go home.” Napolov opened the door to the vehicle and took off his coat. ***“Still, I never thought this day would come. I taught him a lesson.”***

He was genuinely satisfied to have exacted vengeance against Abayev.

“Yes, but...you could have waited until the press reported Abayev was the copycat killer...”

Szubin was expressionless, but very pale and likely frightened. Napolov didn’t seem to notice this, though—much like Sozon, he couldn’t understand Szubin. Or rather, he didn’t feel the need to try to do so. In his mind, there may as well have been no border between the two.

“When Harold sees the crime scene, he’ll conclude the killer was someone Abayev knew, who discovered Abayev was the copycat killer by accident and decided to take revenge on him. If nothing else, that’s what Sozon would have determined.” Napolov believed this from the bottom of his heart and wasn’t flustered whatsoever. ***“Besides, if Abayev got arrested for the copycat crime, we’d lose our opportunity to take revenge on him. Now was our only chance, and we had to hurry. Understand?”***

“...Of course I do. That’s why I called him to speed things along.”

“The next one should be the last time. It’ll be a pretty big performance, so act accordingly.”

“We’re still doing more? We already took revenge...”

“I feel like we can go further than Sozon’s death this time. After all, we got rid of the copycat killer.”

Something felt off—but before she could put her finger on what it was, the Mnemosynes grew distant. Echika continued tracing them back, heading for the events of two and a half years ago. Napolov’s motives were more or less in line with what he’d told Harold. His divorce had triggered his violent nature to go out of control. When he was younger, Napolov parent’s had gotten divorced. His mother, who’d gotten custody of him, became an alcoholic. This made her mentally unstable, and she would periodically abuse him. The only time she was kind to her son was when she called him from work to ask him to run errands. Once she came home, however, things became hellish again. Perhaps because of this background, his desire to make a happy home was stronger than most people’s, and the older he got, the more that wish gestated.

But all the while, his mother’s continuous abuse had caused Napolov’s frustrations to grow. It all started too suddenly. One day, he came back from school and found his mother dead in the living room. Her body was in a gruesome state, her limbs and head lopped off. Her mouth, from which she would always speak to him kindly over the phone, and her hands, which she would strike but never comfort him with—they were all silenced forever.

The killer was arrested days later. He was a middle-aged man who lived in their neighborhood. He’d been recently freed from prison and was released into

the public despite his severe delusions remaining unresolved. He'd killed Napolov's mother within days of his release. He didn't know her beforehand; he simply saw her and was filled with the impulse to attack her.

The public regarded this boy orphaned by his mother with mercy, but a few months later, the Soviet Union collapsed, and everyone forgot about him.

But Napolov took to sketching his mother's body, night after night. He didn't do it out of anger for his mother's sudden murder, or loneliness from having been sent to an orphanage. He was simply envious. *Jealous of the killer*. He truly envied that the murderer had been able to hog his mother all to himself—it made the boy realize that this was what he needed.

He would often get lost in his thoughts, fantasizing about how he would murder his mother. He imagined calling her over the phone gleefully, just like she would call him, only to do same thing the killer had done and hack her to pieces with an electric saw.

This time, he would make her all his. He would get back the quiet, kind, ideal mother of his dreams.

This was a fantasy he would never be able to enact anymore. But imagining it still filled him with inexplicable joy. Even in death, his mother continued eating away at Napolov's heart like mistletoe.

And maybe this was why he began developing relationships of control with other people as he matured. Szubin coming to depend on Napolov had been coincidence, but Napolov coming to dominate him was inevitable. Rather than building peaceful relationships between equals, Napolov was better at maintaining relationships where he was in power.

"I'm broken in some way." "I have to make sure no one ever notices."

He had two faces—one of a mild-mannered police officer, and the other of a blackhearted deviant. He was able to act out both sides perfectly. He had a talent for that. He wasn't even aware he was acting as one side or the other, and that made it easier to keep anyone from ever noticing.

But he couldn't hide it from his wife, with whom he lived, ate, and slept. Their marriage went well at first. They gave birth to their one daughter, and he began

believing that maybe he, too, was capable of treating other people with love. Maybe he could play the part of a normal human being, after all.

But his wife gradually started catching on to his true nature, culminating in her asking for a divorce one day.

“Whenever I’m with you, I just feel like I’m a puppet on a string.”

That was the moment when the one thing he’d wanted since he was a boy, a happy family, shattered to pieces. And what made it worse was that Napolov himself had been a puppet on a string for his mother at the time.

In the end, I became the same kind of adult as she was. I can’t go back. I can’t become a decent human being.

And the moment he gave up and resigned himself to that fate, his heart became lighter. But at the same time, his violent nature grew unrestrained.

“I’ve tried hard enough.” “It’s time I gave myself what I really want.”

And so he morphed into a serial killer. He would seek people with his mother’s likeness, while acting just as she had. Just as she regarded him as a puppet when he was younger, so too would he manipulate Szubin. And at the same time, Napolov saw Szubin as someone similar to him, a man misunderstood by his peers—a reflection of himself.

This was why he was so preoccupied with ending the incident. If he could bury Szubin—bury his own reflection at the very end—he could go back to being a normal boy. Those nightmarish shackles would finally disappear. But there was also a part of him that genuinely enjoyed the murders.

It was all incoherent and warped.

Echika had Brain Dived into many people’s Mnemosynes before, but Napolov was proving to be exceedingly unusual. Something about him was twisted. And he himself was aware of this and had corrected his behavior to blend perfectly into human society, like a devil masquerading as human. However...

“I’ll never truly act like a normal person anyway.”

Napolov’s thoughts whispered this over and over. Like a normal human.

“I’ve always thought you were much more human than I was, Harold...”

Napolov was neither a machine denier nor an Amicus sympathizer, but if he had to pick, he would concede that he never much liked Amicus.

She breached into his middle-level Mnemosynes, approaching the Nightmare of Petersburg murders two and a half years ago. The Mnemosynes piled up, starting with the first victim, then the second and the third. The victims were all lured into a dacha Napolov owned, where he killed them before he put their bodies on display somewhere.

Echika finally arrived at the day Sozon was killed. She could feel Harold tense up through the Lifeline connecting them. Though she was concerned for him, Echika still slid into the Mnemosynes of that day.

As always, Napolov went to work at the Saint Petersburg City Police headquarters' Robbery-Homicide Division, where he went about his job. He took part in the meeting and participated in interrogations related to the murders. He was division chief at the time, but whenever he had the chance, he would go to the crime scenes. He was never suited for desk work and would later ask to be demoted to assistant inspector so he could return to a rank that required him to spend more time in the field—giving him more chances to spend time in bloody incidents.

Time ticked by, second by second. Each moment felt as heavy as lead. At any moment, he was to receive a call from Szubin, letting him know that he'd lured Sozon over the phone. When would that moment come? He stared at the phone expectantly, fearing to so much as blink. But wait though he did, *the call never came*.

Huh?

Napolov returned to the main office and clocked out of work in the evening. He could see that Sozon and Harold were still at the office, and he bid them farewell for the day and left. He sent the recipe he'd planned for dinner that night to his Amicus at home and opened his message box. Szubin messaged him about their next crime, but none of it seemed to have anything to do with Sozon. He then arrived at his apartment and prepared to have dinner as always —

Wait!

Echika was terribly confused, but the Mnemosynes played on indifferently. The time was ten PM, which was around when Sozon was abducted. Napolov, however, made no signs of leaving home, and Szubin didn't contact him, either. In fact, Napolov simply got into bed and fell fast asleep. The light went out.

What does this mean?

Echika looked on, dumbfounded, as the next morning came. Napolov got out of bed like always and got dressed. As soon as he was about to have breakfast, his Your Forma got a call.

<Audio call from Harold Lucraft>

Napolov looked dubious as he picked up.

"What is it, Harold?"

"Chief, I'm sorry for calling so early in the morning." The Amicus sounded distressed. "Sozon didn't come home last night. I thought maybe you'd know something...?"

Napolov's heart filled with genuine alarm and a grim premonition. It was the kind of reaction one would expect any superior to have when he got bad news about a subordinate.

What was going on? This was all wrong. Sozon should have been held captive by the killer by now, but Napolov was legitimately confused.

He gathered Harold and the members of the city police and made his way to the cemetery Sozon was abducted in. They tracked the pickup truck they found in the security cameras and arrested the suspect. Napolov was sincerely panicked.

"Why Sozon?" "What's going on?" "Everyone suspects this is connected with the Nightmare." "Did Szubin lose control and do this on his own?"

The driver's questioning continued as Napolov remained flabbergasted, and Harold came to question him directly.

"This man isn't lying. Please, let him go."

"Did Sozon getting abducted make you lose your mind? It couldn't possibly be anyone but him."

After Harold left, disappointed, Napolov tried to force a confession out of the driver, but it went nowhere. Szubin called him, asking for time off, and Napolov decided to speak with him face-to-face. To avoid drawing attention to their secret talk, he said that he was going to a technologically restricted zone to carry on another ongoing investigation, then used an isolation unit to meet with Szubin.

But of course, Szubin knew nothing about Sozon's abduction. He claimed to have an alibi, but Napolov remained suspicious. He took Szubin along and left the dacha where they killed their victims to go around to the park where they dumped the bodies. Szubin insisted he was innocent to the very end, and by the time they returned to the city police headquarters, dawn had broken—they'd spent the whole night searching.

Napolov waited for the report. For news of Sozon's death and of Harold being rescued. When word came, he was informed of most of what had happened. Napolov repressed the anger bubbling up inside him and reunited with Harold.

The Amicus was sitting on a sofa. He glanced at Napolov but didn't get to his feet. His blond hair was disheveled, his shirt was covered in dirt, and the artificial skin around his neck was cracked, marked with an impression of the ropes that had held him in place. His lakelike eyes were frozen over.

This was what he looked like that day.

"Chief Napolov."

"Harold."

"Sozon, he..., " the Amicus uttered deliriously. "Sozon was...murdered by the Nightmare killer. Right in front of me."

For a moment, something boiled over inside Napolov and erupted. It wasn't anger at having his "precious subordinate" killed. Of course, he made sure to make it seem like it was to mislead everyone else, but that wasn't what infuriated him.

Napolov felt like his entire life had just been stepped on.

He was seized by the desire to prove he was *genuine*.

Echika looked on in amazement as she felt herself slowly being reeled away. Napolov's image within the Mnemosynes grew distant, dripping with rage as his nails dug into his palms.

Yes, Napolov was behind the Nightmare of Petersburg murders. However...

"I'm the man who murdered your partner." "You're a machine. Why are you so torn up about his death?" "And if the detective in charge of the case died at that point, the incident would become more sensational and draw more attention..."

His entire confession was nothing more than a bluff, driven by his disbelief that he had been outdone by a copycat killer.

That can't be true. We've come this far. This should all be over. No...

Echika opened her eyes. She felt someone hold on to her arm, clinging to her for support. It was Harold, who had just pulled out the Brain Diving cord. He was right in front of her, unable to so much as blink, his eyes fixed on her intently. She must have had the same expression as he did.

"Echika."

"...Yes." She bit her lips, overwhelmed with inexplicable frustration. "Looks like this isn't over yet."

"What's wrong?" Detective Akim asked, noticing their agitation. "What did you find?"

They'd found the most terrible revelation possible. Echika somehow managed to bring herself to look at Napolov's still form.

"Assistant Inspector Napolov...wasn't the one who killed Detective Sozon."

Why? I've had enough of this Nightmare.

"Detective Sozon alone was murdered by a copycat killer."

5

The garden in the Union Care Center had withered and lost its colors early. A

winding path led to the parking lot, the passersby all walking hurriedly with their heads ducked. Echika and Harold watched them from the plaza's corner with Detective Akim.

"I see." The detective made no effort to hide his grim expression after leaving the ICU. "One of the Nightmare killer's trademarks was his cautious, methodological nature. This was why we'd all questioned his decision to kidnap Sozon, a detective, at the time, despite the similarity of the crime scene to the other murderers... But it turns out that was the handiwork of a copycat killer."

Ultimately, Napolov had stopped carrying out the Nightmare of Petersburg murders because a copycat killer had taken Sozon's life. With a detective becoming a victim of the killings, the scope of the investigation expanded, and Napolov didn't have the time to slip away from work to commit the murders. Moreover, he'd probably suspected that any careless moves could invite scrutiny onto him, depending on how things went.

In other words, this series of events had instilled in Napolov an intense hatred of copycat killers. And so it was only natural that Napolov would be overcome with anger and murder Abayev after the man committed a copycat crime. That stoked his desire to enact a climax, a killing above the level of anything a copycat could reach, before the reputation of his crime could be tarnished any further.

"The biggest problem is," Echika said grimly. "We still haven't caught them... the copycat who killed Detective Sozon."

Merely saying it aloud made the pain in her ribs come back. Why couldn't it all just be over?

"Napolov couldn't give up on the murders because of the copycat killer," Akim mused to himself. "Which means they might have had a personal grudge against Napolov and knew that he committed those murders. The imitator even knew how to prop up the bodies, so we can't dismiss the possibility that they were somehow involved in the investigation..."

"Either way, there's no doubt that this 'shadow' is as much of deviant as Napolov was," Harold said, his eyes fixed at a freezing fountain.

Silvery water spewed from the overcast sky. Echika chewed on the back of her

lips—it hadn't been Napolov. The shadow who murdered Sozon was someone else, and that person was still out there somewhere, roaming free.

Even after finishing the Brain Dive, Harold's expression was still stiff. And she could understand why—he'd expected this to be the end of his long journey, only to discover this.

"Anyway, I'll report the news to headquarters and we'll continue our investigation." Akim took a deep breath, trying to pull himself back together. "Once Szubin's condition improves, we might learn something useful from his testimony. We may need to ask for your assistance again, Investigator."

"Call me at any time," Echika said.

"Thank you." Akim glanced at Harold and tapped his left arm. Perhaps it was a show of encouragement or an attempt to comfort him. "This isn't a completely closed case, but even so, we were able to bring Szubin and Napolov to justice, and we have you to thank for that... Don't brood over this too much, would you?"

The detective turned around. As he walked off, he got a call and returned to being occupied with the investigation.

Echika stuffed her hands, which were growing numb from the cold, into her pockets. It wouldn't be long before the city police would question them again about the events in that abandoned house. But for better or for worse, the thing she feared most—Napolov's testimony—was unavailable, as his life was on the verge of flickering out. The chances that his Mnemosynes would expose Harold's secret were slim.

Echika shuddered at the relief this made her feel. Though it wasn't as pronounced as it was in Napolov, perhaps she had a devil lurking inside her, too. Or maybe this was true of all people?

She glanced up at Harold, hoping to shake off that vague anxiety. His eyes were fixed on Akim's retreating figure.

"Aide Lucraft."

The Amicus came to and blinked at her voice.

“...It looks like I’m back to square one,” he said.

“...Knowing that a copycat killer was the one who murdered Sozon is a new clue.”

But even Echika had to acknowledge that this was an exceedingly optimistic interpretation. Harold was right; they were back to square one. Of course, catching Napolov and Szubin was an achievement in its own right, and yet...

Why had the shadow tried to steal the crime away from Napolov? Were they out there somewhere, watching how things had played out and sneering all the while? There was no end to her doubts and fears. But more than anything, what weighed on her most was...

“You’re concerned about me, right?”

Having hung her head at some point, Echika looked up in surprise. Her gaze met Harold’s, who was looking down at her. He wasn’t smiling, but his expression did look serene.

He seems...calm?

“...I thought you stopped observing me,” she said.

“I don’t need to observe you to notice that. Your expression’s been quite morose since we finished the Brain Dive.”

“Well...I can’t help that. And you’re not much better—”

“Remember how you said you wouldn’t forgive me?”

Echika’s eyes widened slightly. His lakelike eyes were fixed on her—yes, a lake. Its surface, which had been covered in thick ice so far, was now slightly cracked. The water beneath the ice, which had not been kissed by the sun for so long, was peering through the cracks, reflecting the light of day.

Harold’s eyes had been frozen over since the first time she met him. Echika had thought it was because he was an Amicus—his eyes weren’t real, but meticulously crafted mechanical parts. But now she knew better. After seeing Harold within Napolov’s Mnemosynes, as he’d looked on that fateful day, she knew this wasn’t the case.

“The fact is, I failed to save Sozon,” he said, with the gentleness of handling

something fragile. “So I haven’t given up on pursuing the shadow and getting them arrested. Someday, I’ll face them, and I might try to exact justice on them with my own two hands again.”

“However,” he appended with a whisper.

“If doing that would hurt you...I feel like I would give up on it again.”

Aah.

They were back to square one. Nothing had been resolved. And yet she had reached him, just like how Harold had been able to pull Echika out of her past. Echika felt something hot surge up from her throat. She gritted her teeth, trying to swallow it.

“When that time comes...just remember that I won’t forgive you.”

Her words were warped and contradictory, but sometimes you had to make statements like that to hold things together. And she would do anything to keep it all from falling apart, even if it wasn’t positive or forward thinking. So long as she could allow him to leave that day in the past for a little bit, even in the smallest possible way, so that it wouldn’t haunt him in the present.

“I will. Remembering things is my specialty,” Harold said jokingly, his lips curling into a smile.

Yes, a smile. A smile that was still somehow hurt, but also carefree and awkward. It felt like it had been forever since she’d seen him wear that kind of expression. That was what finally sent relief washing over her. She felt tears well up in her eyes; she hoped he wouldn’t notice. She sniffed, trying to make it all seem like the cold air was getting to her.

“...We should get back to the bureau, too.”

“I’d say you should be going to the hospital instead.”

“The diagnostic AI said recuperating at home is enough for me. And what about you? Your arm is still in bad shape, right?”

“Yes, my compatibility with mass-produced model cables isn’t very good. I’ll need you to nurse me until the proper parts are delivered.”

“I know this is my fault, but...you could be a bit more modest about it.”

They both walked off without realizing it, continuing their awkward back-and-forth. The clouds parted, and faint, bumpy shadows gently extended over the trail. His shoulder, which he’d been protecting, suddenly loosened as he leaned toward her and whispered.

“Echika, there’s one thing I need to ask you.” Harold’s smile melted like early snow as he continued. “If... If my secret ends up getting exposed to the public, don’t try to hide it for me.”

Echika stopped in her tracks, the pebbles of the trail grinding loudly under her feet. The Amicus kept walking ahead of her. As her slightly peeling boots remained rooted where she stood, his shadow cruised past, its edges brushing over them.

The suture of the brain recorded any and all memories, and Mnemosynes were given precedence over all depositions in investigations. Harold knew perfectly, then, that this was an utterly pointless request to make. But he couldn’t help but say it anyway.

She locked away in her heart the regret at having him bear this burden, belated though it may have been to do so.

Dawn broke the next day, and Napolov passed away.



YOUR FORMA

Epilogue
Sprouting

Epilogue

Sprouting

1

<Today's maximum temperature is 9°C. Attire index B, a warm coat is recommended outdoors>

The sky clouded over as they left the hospital in downtown Saint Petersburg, but by the time they arrived at Peterhof, it had cleared somewhat. The Lada Niva pulled over slowly in front of Sozon's family home. Harold let go of the steering wheel and turned around to look at the back seat.

"I'm sorry, Darya, Harold. You didn't have to escort me home," Nicolai said.

"What are you saying? Asking a person who just spent two days in the hospital to drive home alone would have been crazy."

Nicolai, who was sitting next to Darya, patted the back of his head uncomfortably. His discharge from the hospital had been decided just the night before. During his abduction, Nicolai was hit hard on the head by Szubin and knocked unconscious, so he was rushed to the hospital. Thankfully, he'd come to in the ambulance, but they'd hospitalized him just in case. Fortunately, he smoothly recuperated without any major issues to speak of.

Darya, however, was so worried that she insisted they go pick him up. Harold took half a day off to this end and dropped Nicolai off at Peterhof. There was something he needed to give to Nicolai's mother, Elena, anyway.

"Can you get out of the car on your own, Nicolai?"

"Oh, stop it. I'm fine, really. They didn't need to send me to the hospital to begin with."

They stepped out of the Niva, their exchange still ongoing. Harold placed his

hand on the gate, and as if on cue, the front door opened. Out stepped Elena, who must have been watching from the living room window the whole time.

“Nicolai!”

She hurried over, holding the shawl on her shoulders in place as she did. She wrapped her hands around her son, heedless of the fact that people might be watching. Her medical condition had gotten worse over the last few days, so she couldn’t visit Nicolai in the hospital on her own. Though her son was only hospitalized for two nights, Elena was still beside herself with nerves.

“Mom...” Nicolai bent back bashfully, gently pushing his mother away by the shoulders. “That’s enough...”

“Oh, you don’t know what you put me through...”

“No, I do, I’m sorry I made you worry. I thought I’d never see you again—”

As the two basked in the joy of their reunion, Harold glanced at Darya. Her shoulders slumped in genuine relief. It made Harold truly happy to see that they’d gotten through this without Nicolai dying.

The suspects of the Nightmare of Petersburg murders, Napolov and Szubin, had been arrested two days ago. This sudden turn in this most gruesome and unresolved of murder cases was widely reported the whole world over. Web articles covering the story were racking up clicks and views.

The fact that one of the suspects, Napolov, died before indictment was hard to take, but the information the police had gained from Brain Diving into him, coupled with Szubin’s testimony, would help the investigation going forward. Szubin had been terribly shaken upon learning of his “friend’s” death in the hospital, but he seemed to have calmed down since and had begun telling his side of events.

Meanwhile, some citizens were leveling criticism at the city police for failing to recognize Napolov’s deviant nature. Others voiced their displeasure at the fact that the police system hadn’t changed since the Soviet days. But overall, the public reaction generally expressed relief that the case had finally been resolved.

Still, there was an air of discomfort hanging over the citizenry. After all, the

person who killed one of the detectives on the case, Sozon, was not Napolov but an unknown copycat murderer who was still at large. The evening prior, the Saint Petersburg city police reported to a local newspaper that “We will continue the investigation and are putting forth our best efforts toward capturing the copycat killer.” But there was still a long road ahead of them.

Regardless, Nicolai’s safe return was very much a silver lining to top off this incident.

“Mom, I’m only safe because of Harold,” Nicolai told Elena passionately. “If he hadn’t figured out where we were, I might be dead right now.”

“...I see.”

Elena squinted, glancing at Harold timidly. Spurred by his system, Harold smiled gently at her. He then extended his hand, offering to her the object he was holding: a tablet with Delevo Grief Care Company’s logo on it.

“Elena, you should have this.”

The old woman frowned in confusion, looking between Harold’s face and the terminal. “...What is this?”

“It’s Sozon’s digital clone. Delevo sent it to the police yesterday.”

Having learned of what had happened in the case, Delevo’s CEO Shushunova had sent this out of consideration. She attached a message asking that it be delivered to Elena. At that point, Elena regretted making the request and asked for it to be canceled, but Shushunova didn’t know about that. More than anything, Harold didn’t feel right about ignoring her show of goodwill.

And so Harold tried to give Elena the tablet. However...

“No, thank you.”

Elena rejected it, to little surprise.

“Mom,” Nicolai spoke up reproachfully. “You don’t have to be so stubborn anymore. Don’t be so obstinate and—”

“I’m not being obstinate.” Her tone felt somehow softer than before. “I really don’t need it anymore...”

If she kept her eyes fixed on the past, then the things that should be there when she turned to the future again might be gone. Elena whispered this, like she was trying to convince herself. This wasn't pride, nor was it fear—it was accepting reality. Maybe coming face-to-face with the possibility of losing Nicolai had changed something in her?

She closed her wrinkly eyelids and said:

“...I hear they haven't found whoever killed him yet.”

Elena's gaze slowly looked at Harold. Her lead-colored eyes, so similar to Sozon's, struck him. It had been a long time since he'd last looked her in the eye.

“I'm counting on you, Harold.”

With that whisper, Elena silently bowed to him. The gesture lasted only a few seconds, but it rendered Nicolai and Darya speechless. Harold himself stared back at her with blank amazement. Rays of sunlight spilled over Elena's grizzled hair, shining off of it.

Humans were selfish. But every now and then, there were moments where Harold could understand why they were capable of selfishness. Like, for example, right now.

“I'll find the killer. I promise I will.”

He replied firmly, intending it as an oath. In place of a nod, Elena closed her eyes and turned around. Her shawl trailed after her with surprising elegance, and even when Nicolai called for her to stop, she didn't. Her back still looked emaciated and small, like a leaf about to blow in the wind. And yet...

Her shadow, cast over the ground, was brilliantly vivid and clear.

“Looks like Mother finally understands you.”

The Lada Niva was on the road back to downtown Saint Petersburg. Darya beamed at him from the passenger's seat, looking genuinely delighted. Harold recalled Nicolai seeming much the same when they'd parted ways. Nothing pleased him more than seeing those two happy.

“I said I’ll track down the killer, but the city police haven’t asked for my help yet.”

“Oh, enough with your logic. The important thing is that Mother has warmed up to you a bit.” But then Darya closed her eyes like she’d just remembered something. “But...honestly, I’d worry if you do end up going after the murderer.”

“Oh. Did you forget my promise to always come back home?”

“...You’re right.” Darya narrowed her eyes vaguely and smiled back.

“If you kill Napolov here, you’ll be leaving her all alone.”

What Echika told him in the basement replayed in his memory. He’d faltered when she told him that, and with Darya right in front of him, he could believe it. Darya would never wish for Harold to kill the murderer. Doing that would offer her no salvation.

It was self-centered of me to shoulder all those burdens on my own.

But at the time, it had felt like if he didn’t try to take everything on himself, he wouldn’t be able to act at all. But oddly enough, he didn’t feel that way anymore. The warmth of Echika’s embrace still burned bright in his chest. There was no doubting that this was all thanks to her.

“By the way, Harold. Are you sure you’ll be able to get to work during the afternoon after stopping by Delevo?”

“Yes, it should be fine. They sent the clone to us out of sympathy, so it’d be rude to just mail it back to them, don’t you think?”

“I do respect your sense of duty,” Darya said in an impersonation of Harold. “And, hmm... There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you since this morning.”

She glanced at him with a satisfied smile.

“This new scarf looks nice on you.”



Delevo Grief Care Company's lounge had an impressive panoramic view today as well. The Gulf of Finland glittered under the faint sunlight as boats cruised across its surface. Harold glanced at his terminal and found that he'd received a new message from Darya. While he was taking care of his errands, she'd gone out exploring the lower levels of the shopping mall before deciding to burn some time at a café.

"Thank you for your patience." The engineer from the other day showed up after a short wait. "Shushunova is a bit tied up right now... She asked me to show you to the office. Come with me."

He led Harold to the manager's office and parted ways with him at the entrance. Harold walked in alone. Like last time, the place was looked like an aquarium made of frosted glass. He went around the partition into the back room and into the circular "central control room."

"Pardon me for not stepping out to greet you, Mr. Lucraft."

Shushunova was seated in front of a monitor. A cable connected to the PC was spread across the floor, connecting to a custom model Amicus seated on the sofa. This was Shushunova's significant other from the other day—his name was Bernard, if memory served.

"I just started his system backup... I have to keep watch to make sure no issues pop up."

Bernard had his suit and jacket off, and his left sleeve was rolled up, revealing the USB port in his shoulder, to which the cable was connected. The location of an Amicus's port varied in custom models. Since all his system processing was concentrated on one spot at that moment, Bernard's eyes were closed, and he was perfectly still.

"Not at all; my visit was pretty sudden, too. Are there any problems with Bernard?"

"Oh, no, I was just thinking of developing a new market and wanted him to help me." Shushunova smiled, flashing her white teeth. "Don't you think the idea of an Amicus's digital clone sounds lovely?"

"Well..." Harold had to tilt his head quizzically. "How is it different from a

backup?”

“I could have explained myself better.” She brought a hand to her cheek. “What I mean is...I thought of storing not just his system setting and memory, but his personality, too. To do that, I’d extract the code that regulates his ‘personality’—”

Shushunova was dead serious. However, she’d made the kind of misunderstandings true Amicus sympathizers were prone to. To begin with, current-generation Amicus had a standardized uniform “character” and were devoid of any deeper personality. They only acted as their programming dictated, and while they would optimize their behavior to match their owners’ needs and desires, they had no “character” to speak of, only experiences stored in their memory.

But he didn’t need to point this out. Once Shushunova started analyzing the code, she’d come to that conclusion on her own. Harold decided not to touch on her critical misunderstanding.

“I actually came over to return the tablet that you sent us.” Harold handed over the paper bag containing the tablet.

Once he explained the situation, Shushunova accepted it calmly. Thankfully, she didn’t seem offended by this.

“Someone not needing the help of a digital clone is news to rejoice over,” she said softly. “I’ll go get you some tea. Take a seat.”

“Oh, no, I should really be going.”

Darya was waiting for him, and he had work to do in the bureau. Harold tried to refuse, but Shushunova stepped away from the room—there was a kitchenette in the office, if he recalled. That’s probably where she’d gone, but...going after her to insist he needed to leave would probably be rude.

Harold activated his wearable terminal to message Darya again, when—

“Pardon me for not greeting you properly.”

Harold moved his gaze over to the source of the voice. Bernard, seated on the sofa, had opened his eyes. He seemed to have finished his backup. He removed

the cable from his shoulder and rolled his sleeve back down before getting to his feet.

“I’m honored to see you again, Mr. Lucraft.”

Bernard smiled peacefully and *extended his hand for a shake*.

Harold stared at him with wordless surprise. This must have been a joke—Amicus only communicated with each other in the name of expressing human-like behavior. It wasn’t necessary to act this way when humans weren’t there to observe them. No Amicus would do that.

And yet the Amicus right in front of him had extended his hand for a shake. What Shushunova had told Harold about copying an Amicus’s personality crossed his mind, but when he’d met Bernard the other day, he hadn’t spared so much as a glance at Harold.

“Perform a self-diagnosis.” Harold instructed him in place of a handshake. “Are you malfunctioning?”

“Malfunctioning...?” Bernard paused for thought. “I undergo scheduled maintenance. Everything is operating normally.”

“But you’re clearly deviating from your programming. Is there a problem with your system code?”

“I don’t know,” Bernard said with a perturbed expression. “I simply wish to shake your hand.”

He himself hadn’t noticed that he was acting abnormally. This implied that, like all current-generation Amicus, he lacked the intelligence to objectively observe his own actions.

“Do you like coffee?”

Shushunova soon returned, carrying a tray with cups on it.

“Ms. Shushunova,” Harold said, his eyes still fixed on Bernard. “Where do you usually have him go through with maintenance?”

“Huh?” She seemed clearly confused. “I always have Novae Robotics Inc. handle it, like usual...”

“Have they spotted any abnormalities in him?”

“No. Never.”

“You mentioned hiring the service of a custom-made Amicus vendor. When was that?”

“Five years ago...,” Shushunova said, her expression turning suspicious. “Is this an interrogation of some sort?”

“Then it must have been the vendor. His system code was likely...modified.”

Shushunova widened her eyes, and she shook her head in disbelief. Perhaps she was bewildered, or denying the possibility altogether—Bernard, meanwhile, stood stock-still, confusion still clear on his face. Harold felt a sinking feeling settle over him.

“Do you remember the name of that custom-made Amicus vendor?”

“Yes.” Shushunova bit her lips, red with lipstick, a few times. “It was a private contractor. I think his name was...Lascelles, if I recall.”

Harold felt his circulatory fluid’s temperature drop.

Alan Jack Lascelles.

Aaah. We’ve overlooked something terribly important, haven’t we?

2

“So Ms. Shushunova, you’re saying you know absolutely nothing?”

“Yes, that’s right. Mr. Lascelles was a typical custom model dealer...”

The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau’s Saint Petersburg branch. Investigator Fokine sat opposite Shushunova on the other side of the interrogation room’s one-sided mirror. Her skin looked quite pale, and her hair, which had been done up so prettily the other day, now rested messily on her shoulders.

Echika pressed on the corners of her eyes with fatigue. Just when she thought the Nightmare incident had finally settled down, this happened.

“What’s going on? I thought Lascelles only made TOSTI. Now it turns out he’s

doing this, too?”

“So it seems,” Harold said, standing next to her with a grave expression. “Shushunova said Bernard was modified five years ago, which was before TOSTI was made open source. Lascelles was already active as early as back then.”

Bernard’s modification was discovered the day prior. Harold had gone to Delevo to return the tablet, where he accidentally learned Bernard was operating with an independence that went beyond what a current-generation model Amicus should have been capable of. Neither he nor Echika had expected a clue about Lascelles to turn up at a place like that.

For three months, the Special Investigations Unit had been focused on recovering instances of TOSTI, but as it turned out, they’d only been putting blinders on themselves.

“Unauthorized custom Amicus dealers are not permitted to alter an Amicus’s system code. It’s illegal.” Fokine looked at Shushunova with a severe expression. “We sent Bernard to Novae Robotics Inc. yesterday, and their engineers called to deliver the analysis report. They said they discovered a back door of sorts in his system programming.”

“He’s absolutely normal,” Shushunova insisted. “I don’t understand. What are you talking about?”

“A back door is a means of hiding illegal code. In Bernard’s case, the back door’s contents added a modification to his utility function system... In other words, it added unnecessary independence to his system. Your Amicus is in violation of the International AI Operations Law.”

A system that violated the International AI Operations Law immediately called the RF Models’ neuromimetic system to mind. That, too, was hidden inside system code. Though it went without saying that Bernard’s system was nowhere up to par with an RF Model’s. He was originally a current-generation Amicus model manufactured by Novae Robotics Inc.

Echika felt a migraine coming on as she glanced at Harold.

“Honestly speaking, Bernard looked like a normal Amicus to me. If anything, you’re much more independent than he was. How is he breaking the

Operations Law?”

“I’m classified as a ‘next-generation all-purpose AI’ to begin with, designed to balance independence and safety.” Harold avoided mentioning the neuromimetic system, instead describing his specs as they were on paper. “But Bernard’s specs are the same as all current-generation Amicus’s, so even the slightest deviation could bring on unexpected accidents.”

But if that was the case...

“Nothing happened in the last five years. Isn’t that basically a miracle?”

“More of a small mercy, if I had to say.”

“What’s going to happen to him?”

“Depending on how the investigation goes, he’ll probably have his system code corrected and be returned to Shushunova.”

So he wouldn’t be trashed, at least. This was probably the slightest bit of consolation to Shushunova—but for some reason, she didn’t seem the slightest bit relieved.

“He’s not dangerous at all. There must be a mistake of some kind.” Shushunova clenched her hand so hard that the knuckles on her ring finger turn white. “All I did was install an add-on Mr. Lascelles sent me.”

“That add-on must have been tampered with somehow.” Fokine said gently. “Are you certain there were no problems whatsoever with Bernard? Nothing that comes to mind?”

“Yes.” Shushunova nodded, but then paused like she’d realized something. “No... Actually, when I sent him shopping, there were times he’d go off somewhere and wouldn’t come home for a while. He likes taking walks and feeding the pigeons in the park... He picked up those habits on his own.”

“That’s...quite unusual behavior for an Amicus obeying his programming, don’t you think?”

“Now that you mention it, maybe it is.” Shushunova’s eyes filled with tears. “But he’s like a human being to me, so I never questioned it. I didn’t think it could be—”

She covered her face, overwhelmed. Fokine hurriedly got to his feet and offered her a handkerchief. Echika couldn't bear to look at this any longer. After all...

"She's married to Bernard." Shushunova's joyous expression from back then wouldn't leave her mind. "If they fix his code, will his personality change?"

"If nothing else, he'll stop taking detours and feeding the pigeons." Harold nodded.

"And will he stop treating Ms. Shushunova as his wife?"

"He shouldn't have been doing that to begin with." The Amicus glanced at the one-way mirror. "Bernard's independent behavior is, in other words, his system's idea of playacting. He's a current-generation model, so his emotional engine shouldn't be capable of feeling love. All he was doing was learning whatever behavior Shushunova expected out of him and acting accordingly."

Echika furrowed her brows. "A long time ago, you told me that Amicus are capable of love. Were you lying?"

"That was half-lie, half-truth." *The hell does that mean?* "Bernard isn't capable of falling for someone, but he's capable of *appearing like he's in love*. From the perspective of humans, the difference between those two things is quite trivial. Put another way, it's an example of the Chinese Room experiment."

In which case, Echika's misgivings the other day were justified. Whenever Shushunova talked about her relationship with Bernard, she looked truly happy, but if Echika were to speak her mind without consideration for the woman's feelings...

"This is just...her convincing herself."

"For humans, what you believe in is the most important thing," Harold mused quietly. "Amicus are nothing but mirrors to show you what you wish to see, and answering that desire is our purpose."

"That might be true for mass-produced Amicus, but..."

It's not true for you. Echika left the end of her sentence unsaid. Saying this to

him would achieve nothing.

“Regardless,” Harold continued. “The headquarters’ analysis team is fully mobilized to analyze the structure of Bernard’s back door. What they find might be useful for the ongoing attempts to discover TOSTI’s secrets.”

“True. I hope they find something.”

There was a clear discrepancy between the performance of Lascelles’s analysis AI, TOSTI, and the Amicus’s source code. The analysis team was working under the assumption that there was a back door hiding its real code, but even experts brought from outside were unable to discover the truth.

Echika brushed her bangs back and returned her gaze to the one-way mirror.

“We’ve looked into the website that Lascelles used while claiming to be a custom-made Amicus vendor, but it’s already been deleted. We can’t find it,” Fokine said, as he settled back into his chair. “Did he offer the same services as other custom-made vendors?”

“No, I think he was handling some kind of custom-made parts service,” Shushunova said, pressing the handkerchief to her lips and sniffing. “Everything he did was about adding expanded functionalities.”

“So all the dealings with him were done online. The only way you could him was sending messages, and you never saw his face or heard his voice?”

“Yes. The things I requested were delivered on time and I never had any issues, so I ended up trusting him...”

“If you still have records of your message history with him, I’d appreciate it if you could send them to my Your Forma.”

It seemed there was no need for a Brain Dive for the time being. As always, Lascelles’s objectives were unknown. Modifying an Amicus’s utility function system, publishing TOSTI as open-source code... The only thing those two actions had in common was their defiance of International AI Operations Law, but it was unclear what he was trying to accomplish. But just like with TOSTI, there was a good chance the damage he’d done wouldn’t end with Bernard.

Either way...

“I don’t think we’ll glean anything else from Shushunova’s testimony.”

“Yes.” Harold jerked his chin, disappointed. “Let’s return to the office for the time being.”

And so Echika and Harold left the interrogation room. But as they closed the door, they spotted a figure racing toward them from down the hall—it was Bigga, her long braids bouncing in her wake. Upon spotting them—or more specifically, Harold—she exclaimed loudly.

“Aaah! Harold! Thank goodness, you’re all right...!”

Come to think of it, Bigga hadn’t seen him for three days. She’d ended up accompanying Nicolai as he was taken away in the ambulance and hadn’t gone back to the crime scene. After that, she was occupied with attending the academy for two days and couldn’t show up at the bureau. Echika had messaged her to let her know that Harold was fine, though.

“Bigga.” Harold walked over to her, relieved. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

“Are you all right now? I was so scared when I heard you got shot!”

“I’m okay. My new parts haven’t arrived yet, though, so my right arm’s movements are still a little janky.”

“If you’re having trouble with anything, just say the word!” But then Bigga noticed the coat and scarf Harold was carrying in his arm. “Wait, is that...?”

Echika finally caught on to it, too. The scarf was brand-new and marine blue in color. If she recalled correctly, it was the one Bigga had given him as a gift some time ago—she hadn’t noticed at all until now.

“I-I’m so happy!” Bigga said, her cheeks flushing over with emotion. “You wore it!”

“It’s keeping me quite warm. Thank you.” Harold smiled at Bigga naturally, like he always did.

Echika knew Bigga had agonized quite a bit over him not putting the scarf on, so she was happy to see her finally at ease.

But while she was relieved, Echika felt as though something was squeezing the depths of her heart. What was this?

“Ah.” Bigga looked up, apparently having gotten a message. “I’m sorry, the Investigation Support Department is calling for me... I need to get going!”

She ran off with light steps, looking like she might start skipping at any moment, and vanished down the hall. At some point, without realizing it, Echika had brought a hand to her chest. Murky feelings were brewing inside her. Maybe it was her cracked ribs acting up?

“What’s wrong, Echika?”

She snapped back to reality. Harold was looking down at her curiously.

“It’s nothing.” She casually moved her hand behind her back. “Anyway... About this case. We need to investigate if Lascelles modified any more Amicus. Things are going to get busier.”

“True,” he said in a concerned tone. “If your wounds still hurt, maybe you should go back to the hospital?”

“I don’t think it hurts. Maybe my stomach’s just grumbling.”

“After the ham and cheese incident, now you can’t tell a tummyache from a grumbling stomach?”

“Just so I’m sure, did you just make fun of me?”

“Heavens, no. I’m sincerely concerned for you.”

“Well, gee, thanks.”

Still exchanging quips, Echika and Harold made their way to the office. The emotion occupying her heart vanished, drop by drop, with every step they took together.

Afterword

A year has passed since the publication of Volume 1, and we've thankfully reached Volume 4. I would like to extend my gratitude to my readers for helping me get this far. I hope you've enjoyed this volume.

This entry in the series concerns the Nightmare of Petersburg, which was alluded to in Volume 1. I feel like dwelling on the details of the narrative here is improper, but there's one thing I would like to mention. The Interlude chapter, taking place in snowy London, was actually written before I started work on Volume 4. I'm glad to have gotten a chance to include it in the book.

By the way, I realize Russian naming conventions might be a bit complicated, so allow me to explain. It goes "given name+patronym+last name," or "last name+given name+patronym." It's customary to use just the given name and patronym when referring to people respectfully, and last names are only used in formal settings. Otherwise, people refer to each other with nicknames when they are close or intimate with each other. For the sake of simplifying things, I decided to have all characters call each other by their given names only in this novel.

Now for some thanks. To my editor, Yoshida, I still regret showing you that cumbersome first draft. You were an immense help in turning this novel into something more readable. To my illustrator, Tsubata Nozaki. Thank you for yet another volume's worth of gorgeous illustrations. The cover art of the girls is incredibly cool. To the mangaka, Yoshinori Kisaragi. I'm always excited to read the manga version. Please take good care of yourself.

And to you, readers: I'd be happy to see you again in the next volume.

February 2022, Mareho Kikuishi

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